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"GO, SIR, AND WHEN YOU MAKE HELENE YOUR BRIDE I WILL WISH YOU MUCH JOY. GO!"

The Ebon Mask; or, The Mysterious Guardian.

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL,

Author of "The Winged Messenger," "The Masked Bride," Etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE JEALOUS LOVER.

It was a lovely winter morning in the year 177—, and the young town of Pensacola, in the beautiful "land of flowers," lay green and fair, bathed in the early sunlight of that February morning. Not a half a score of years had passed since the settlement of the village, yet it already wore an air of comfort and prosperity. Many stately dwellings were erected, and the inhabitants secure and content in their Southern home, where the flowers ever bloom, and the air comes balmy and spicy, laden with a thousand sweets.

Upon a slight eminence, a little to the left of the town, stood a residence more pretentious in style and more imposing in appearance than any of its neighbors. Tall cedars and the fragrant aniseed grew side by side, while the oranges, palms, and the lovely bay-trees intermingled their beautiful foliage, and sheltered the house from the heat.

On three sides were shade and perfume; the fourth commanded a view of the limpid waters of the bay; and the cool air of the early morning was rendered still more refreshing by the breeze off the waters.

Standing upon an open space, scarce pretentious enough to be called a balcony, with eyes eagerly scanning the blue, broad expanse before him,

was a man evidently forty years of age. His back is toward us, but, from the square and not ungraceful shoulders, tall, arrowy form, and raven hair, we should judge the face to be good; perhaps not handsome, but certainly pleasing.

He turns; there is impatience in his movement and gesture, and muttered words fall from his lips.

There, he is full before us, and we see his features. Handsome, are they not? Those eyes are blacker than ebony, and large, lustrous, and passionate. The brow is rather high, but the dark, half-curling locks seem to fall caressingly, rather than carelessly, over its white expanse. The mouth is haughty, and the lips curve proudly; but there is a certain something, at first sight indefinable, that impresses the gazer; a peculiar expression that betokens—what? Notice again the apparently faultless eyes, so brilliant and jetty. See you that sensuous gleam—a deep, almost hidden boldness? There, at the mouth again—yes, it is so—he, the handsome man, the elegant beau, is an accomplished deceiver, a practiced villain.

Again he approaches the window and scans the bay; his eyes grow fierce and angry; and he pushes his heavy black hair impatiently from his brow.

"Vexation! does the villainous rogue imagine I shall wait all day upon his laggard footsteps? A sound bastinado, if he arrives not within a quarter of an hour."

His voice was harsh, and when he spoke his face seemed to lose much of its beauty. Ten minutes he waited, now glancing anxiously without, then resuming his quick, impatient promenade. As he seemed about to leave his watch-post, he neared the window again; a quick, low cry escaped him, and he hastily raised his handkerchief to his face, then

waving it twice, hung it upon a steel hook just outside the casement, where it slowly folded and unfolded, as the capricious breeze toyed with it.

Almost immediately below the window, and about anchoring, was a small boat, light and graceful. A single person occupied it, and he seemed awaiting something. The signal from the casement had been observed and replied to, for a small flag flaunted from the stern-end of the canoe, and the boatman sat carelessly down, as if expecting more.

From the little turret, the impatient watcher turned to the door, and passed down the stairway into the open entry below, and out upon the ground. With a firm step and expectant countenance, he walked rapidly down to the water's edge, where he met the solitary sailor.

"Well, and what news?"

The question was demanded, rather than asked.

"Poor news, I fear, sir. There were no tidings, and no one at all appeared to know anything about him."

The scowl on the querist's face grew darker as he said:

"Curses on him! But did you go the other place, Pinto?"

"Yes, sir; but I could not see the lady, so did not leave the message. I thought her mother seemed angry when I told her I desired to see—"

"Silence, fool! Unsuccessful in both errands! Truly a valuable messenger! That will do for the present; repair to your quarters until I send for you."

With lowering brow and disappointment plainly written on every feature of his countenance, Antonio Zarate turned away to meditate and reflect upon his unsuccessful plans.

The boatman followed him with a fiery gaze.

"Valuable messenger," indeed! And how could I or any one else help it? Didn't I go five miles further down the bay on purpose to see if I could learn of him? And if I didn't beg of the lady to let me see her daughter, then I don't know what begging is. 'Valuable messenger!' If the brave lieutenant commanding isn't careful, he'll find Pepe Pinto a different sort of messenger from what he expects."

The messenger, Pepe Pinto, had anchored his boat, and secured it still further by tying it to a short mangrove tree, while the bitter words passed his lips; and now, as he started toward his "quarters," to which he was ordered, he saw his officer, just as he entered the doorway; and again the anger burst forth in words:

"Go on, senior commandante, in your wickedness, for the day will come—the day of retribution! You think to win her, the beautiful Florida blossom, but you can't; no, you can never woo her from her first love—her true lover. And the brave hunter can laugh at you, and Pepe can laugh, too, for he knows more than you think he does. Ha! ha! Senior Antonio Zarate, noble sir commandante, with all your charms, you will not succeed, now or never!"

The excited youth had reached his barrack, and passed out of sight through the entrance-way.

Further up the gentle eminence, and into the pleasant white house had gone Antonio Zarate, with the pale hue of baffled villainy in his sinister face.

"Contemptible rascal! He had better fly my vengeance, for he knows I am desperate. Little care I, if he ever sets foot upon Pensacola's shores again; but this I do care; he must not—shall not again see her. The lily-livered whelp, to dare to aspire to her hand!"

By a violent effort he checked his anger, and rising, rung a small bell that stood upon a stand. A menial answered his summons.

"Has Louis arrived yet?"

"Just this moment, sir, and is now without awaiting your orders."

"Tell him to ride instantly to the block-house, and without delay give this billet to Lucas De Leon. Haste, and tell Louis if he is back in good time, a golden onza shall reward him for his trouble. Here, sirrah—the note."

He had hastily scribbled on a chance scrap of paper a line. The servant took it, bowed servilely, and departed.

The officer lighted his cigarrito, and, not having breakfasted, rung for his meal. It was brought, and eating it, he resumed his smoking.

Not long did he await the coming of De Leon, for it scarce seemed possible that the boy Louis had reached the block-house, ere he returned, accompanied by a horseman, who, as he galloped through the gateway, flung the reins to his guide, at the same time tossing him a coin.

"What, Lucas, so soon? I surely promised Louis the onza if he returned quickly; but this is worth double that, for it exceeds speed. Come, draw up and take a glass of wine to refresh you after your ride."

"Thanks, Antonio. What capital wine you keep! Now, my cigar is lighted, and I am curious to hear the tid-bit of news promised in the brief note."

"No 'tid-bit,' Lucas, if by that you mean a choice morsel; far from it, *mon amigo*. Rather a big lump of vexation, rage and mortification."

De Leon opened his eyes wider.

"Ah, I comprehend—and I don't wonder. You mean the beautiful Helene Valencie?"

"The same; and you speak truly when you call her beautiful. Those eyes and ringlets are enough to set any head turning, be it a wise one or a weak."

"They can upset a wise one, that is clear," laughed De Leon, carelessly loosening the ashes from the tip of his cigar. "But seriously, Antonio, what is it that so troubles you?"

"You know her lover, the hunter and friend of the Indians? Well—"

"What?" interrupted De Leon, "Helene Valencie has a lover, and it is not you?"

His voice indicated extreme surprise.

"Yes, and that's just exactly it. I didn't know it myself until lately, but it's even so."

"Strange! You say he is a hunter, and on amicable terms with the Indians, too?"

"So I learn; and the fair Helene loves him."

De Leon was looking thoughtfully out of the window.

"And you sent for me, Antonio, to assist you?"

"Exactly; will you do it?"

"How can I? What must I do?"

"Lucas," and the villainous face of Antonio Zarate bent close to his companion—"Lucas, there is such a word as *compulsion*."

His comrade smiled.

"I am aware of it; I understand such things, *mon amigo*. You know, in our country, beautiful Spain, such transactions are common. This wouldn't be the first one Antonio Zarate had a hand in, eh?"

A meaning smile was his reply.

"And you can do it, think you?"

"Without doubt."

"And how?"

"Plenty of time, and plenty of opportunities. Patience is the essential quality in my case."

"And as to the whereabouts of this lover—"

"Ah, that is just what I would like to know. Mysterious, of course, in all his movements. He heard I had sworn to kill him—so Pepe Pinto says—and preferring life to death, has suddenly disappeared."

"Of course his lady-love is advised of his proceedings?"

"I know not; but if I could learn his wild haunts, I would have him arrested and confined under some pretext or other."

"Can't you find him?"

"I might, possibly. I have a trusty follower, a servant I brought with me, who can be relied on most implicitly. He was accustomed to such errands, so would be no novice. I might send him, I suppose."

"You might, indeed. But, Antonio, I had no idea the morning was so far advanced. I will be compelled to leave, for duty calls. *Adios*."

Together Lucas De Leon and the commandante left the room.

CHAPTER II.

THE UNWELCOME GUEST.

It was after sunset; the great golden orb had sunk to repose beneath the waves of the bay, while over its limpid waters still streamed a brilliant radiance, a bright line of light left by the departing luminary. The purple twilight was softly stealing on, and slowly but surely embracing the fragrant groves of aniseed, orange and myrtle. The tall palmettos swayed in the wind, and from afar came the music of the breeze as it rippled through the cedars, or sung its dirge-like melody, while it disturbed the solemn quietness of gloomy cypresses.

The evening was but a type of many evenings in "linda Florida," cold, balmy, spicy, romantic.

Among a grove of orange trees stood a low frame cottage; no appliances of wealth marked it, but its every feature bore unmistakable evidence of refined taste. Before the low door, upon the green mossy earth, sat a creature

"Of face so fair,
Of form so rare,"

that one unconsciously gazed again to assure

himself that she was a human being, and not an angel or fairy.

It was not in beauty of feature that Helene Valencie excelled all others; it was not that her eyes were brighter, deeper, clearer than any of the other village beauties, or that her lovely jetty hair fell rippling over a fairer neck than theirs; it was not all this that impressed the observer with an indelible picture of her superior beauty; it was the pure soul, the gentle disposition, marked in every character of her face, in every lineament of her features.

Pure, gentle, and loving, Helene Valencie was an object to love and to be loved.

And she did love, and was loved.

Julian St. John, the fair-haired hunter, although not a native of sunny Florida, Helene's adopted home, was her chosen—the one to whom she had given all her young heart's devotion; and well worthy was he of the affection bestowed upon him.

She sat alone before the humble doorway, gazing upon the brilliant evening star, that hung shimmering in the sky, when a gentle touch on the arm aroused her from her slight reverie. She started and turned.

"Oh, Pepe, is it you? How you startled me."

"Beg your pardon, senorita; but I am in great haste to regain my quarters before Colonel Zarate discovers my absence."

"What, are you away again without leave?"

"Again, lady? Were I to wait for permission to come here, I'd never get it. You don't know senior commandante so well as I do."

"I suppose not; yet for all that I am assured he is a bad man. Pepe, did you bring me my message?"

The color, deepening on her face, betrayed her anxiety.

"Yes, senorita; here it is."

"And you saw Julian?"

"I did not; but found the note in the usual place, under the same stone. I hope the young master is well and safe?"

Her quick eye had read the tiny billet, and as she refolded it, came her reply:

"Physically well, yes; but hunted and driven like a beast. What has he done, Pepe, so fearful?"

"Does the senorita know his enemies are personal foes, pursuing him for personal reasons and dislikes?"

Helene's face paled, and a murmured "Heaven save him!" fell from her lips.

"Pepe, my friend, I will reply to this note, and will you see about giving it to him! Sit down a moment while I write."

"Please hasten, for, should my absence be known, the consequences might not be remarkably pleasant."

The Spanish girl's figure disappeared, and Pepe Pinto sat alone in Senora Valencie's doorway—Pepe Pinto, the colonel's "valuable messenger!"

Even so; Pepe Pinto, the soldier, the commandante's servant, his orderly, was a spy upon his officer's conduct. Well he knew of Antonio Zarate's passion for the beautiful Helene, of his deep hatred and jealousy of the accepted lover, Julian. He played his part well, and when the villainous officer told him to search after the fortunate rival, and bring news of his whereabouts, it was a very easy matter to return from an apparently fruitless inquiry; while at the same time it was quite as easy to carry a message from Helene and bring a reply.

Then, too, when ordered to stop at the dwelling of the lady, and demand an answer to his questions, it was only a pleasant errand to step in, tarry a while, and return with the message:

"Dona Valencie denies any right of Senior Zarate to question her, or her daughter, regarding persons in whom Senior Zarate can have no possible interest."

Blind to everything but his own wicked purposes, Antonio Zarate never suspected his apparently trusty servant, and laid his plans in fancied security.

Sent by the Spanish Government with a body of soldiers, and accompanied by nearly fifty families, he had come to America, and, under the direction of the Spanish authorities, who then held Florida, settled upon the shores of Pensacola Bay, christening their little town by the same softly-flowing name. Here, despite occasional attacks by the white man's enemies—the terrible Seminoles—the young settlement flourished, and in less than ten years after its birth numbered nearly four thousand inhabitants, many American, some pure Spanish, but more *Spano-Americano*, or half-breeds.

Julian St. John was an American—a North American; but a residence of eight years in the

Spanish settlement had changed his appearance somewhat, while in custom and habit he remained true to nature.

At the block-house, where were stationed the troops, under command of Colonel Zarate, all was gayety and animation. The wine ran in red streams, and loud oaths mingled with shouts of drunken laughter. The mirth was not unusual, for among the officers revels were of nightly occurrence. Piles of Spanish currency lay on the table; beside them, soiled cards and glittering dice.

Somewhat apart from the noisy group sat the commandante, his restless gaze bent toward the west. Directly he arose, and donning his military hat, and drinking a glass of fragrant lemonade to remove from his breath all traces of cigar scent, strolled out the gateway, and down the shaded road to a small white cottage. His summons was answered by a tall, dignified lady.

"Ah, senora, I bid you a very good evening; and your charming daughter also. Am I intruding? I hope not, for I had promised myself a pleasant chat with Senora Valencia."

"Be seated, senor, although the poor cabin affords few comforts to one accustomed to luxuries."

The lady's tone was cold and distant; but the determined lover was not to be thus repelled.

"Did I not see your daughter as I came in? I imagined so."

"She was here, but left the room to attend to a caller just before your arrival."

At this moment, low tones were heard from the adjoining room, near the rear entrance.

"Pepe, go; be quick! Your master is here now, and you must not tarry. Remember, tomorrow at sunset, be at the orange grove. Adios."

"Hold, rogue, villain! What do you here?"

It was Colonel Zarate who spoke. He had heard the name "Pepe," low as it was spoken, and, forgetful of good-breeding, had darted to the back door, just in time to see his servant depart.

The secret heart of Pepe Pinto was rejoiced at his being discovered. Long had he wished for an opportunity to free himself from his severe superior in command, but, as yet, no chance had presented itself. But now, were he again to fall into the hands of the cruel commandante, his fate would certainly be imprisonment, probably worse.

Of course he would never return to his barracks to meet that punishment. He was then free, though a deserter. But what of that? Once away, he would join his friend, Julian St. John, and together they would roam the forests, bidding defiance to the colonel and his chivalric followers—a set of privileged desecrators, gamblers, murderers, although in the service of the great Philip.

"What do I here? My business, sir, which is none of yours."

"Silence. Do you dare to reply thus to me?"

No reply was vouchsafed him, and again he asked:

"Do you dare, I say, speak thus to me?"

"I do dare! What or who are you, that I should care for you? From this hour you number Pepe Pinto no more as one of your tools. I go, I fly; not so much to escape your vengeance as to aid the hunter in foiling you and your spies. Ha! ha! Colonel Zarate! Pepe knows a little more than you think for! Adios, noble sir; do not fear, you will see me again."

Laughing scornfully, he sprang away, leaving the trio in mute amazement. Rage empurpled Zarate's countenance, as he turned to Dona Valencia.

"What does it mean? I demand to know. Tell me."

"When Senor Zarate so far forgets himself as to speak thus, he can scarcely expect an answer."

The lady's voice was calm and dignified, but it only increased his ire.

"And you, girl, are in league with the vilest rascal on the face of the earth. But you will be foiled. Julian St. John shall never wed with you, and before many days Helene Valencia shall be the bride of the commandante."

The girl was pale, but collected. She pointed to the open door.

"There, sir, is the way. My mother and I prefer our own society to that of a villain and a coward. Go, sir, and when you make Helene your bride, I will wish you much joy. Go!"

Together with her mother she left the room, passing to their bedroom and securing the door. The officer was left alone, standing in the deserted apartment. For a moment only did he

thus wait, then striding angrily out, returned to the block-house, to chew the bitter cud of revenge and baffled villainy.

Not half an hour later, stealing through the green thicket, was a figure, its bright eyes gleaming in the starlight, and the long, heavy tresses of ebon hair rolling down the neck and shoulders in rippling waves. With anxious eyes the woman scanned the low, thatched cottage, and then, as if satisfied with the reconnaissance, stole more boldly along till she came directly under an open casement, in which the moonbeams poured, revealing the figure of a young girl, attired in a loose flowing garment of white. The woman's wild eyes were peering at the fair face while she spoke:

"Ah, Forest-Bird, you have folded your wings, but the night-hawk is prowling yet. Little one, the enemy is abroad."

Helene started, but regained her composure. "Oh, Nina, are you there? Wait a moment while I come down and unbar the door."

"No, no; let the bolts and bars be. Nina wants no roof to rest under; the blue sky is her canopy, and the green savannas her couch. But the Southern Blossom, the brilliant Forest-Bird, needs protection, for the enemy is prowling."

"Enemies have I, Nina? And what have I done that foes should lie in wait for me?"

"What does the innocent doe, that the trap should be laid, or the little bird that the net should be spread?"

The young girl's face grew thoughtful, for she remembered the threat.

"If the snare is laid, how can I escape?"

The woman's eyes flashed; she drew herself to her full height, and proudly replied:

"Does the Forest-Bird forget she has Nina for her friend? and Nina, the 'Wild Wanderer,' never forgets a friend!"

"Thanks, thanks, and Helene is proud of her champion. She will never fear."

"And the hunter has a strong arm and a stout heart to defend the maiden! But, beware of him that comes when the sun is gone down; whose eyes are black and shining, and full of evil. Beware, Bird of the Forest, of the fowler who shall fix the net! But, remember, Nina is a true friend, and the hunter-lover has strong arms and a warm heart!"

Stealthily and carefully the strange creature crept away from Helene's presence, burying herself in the magnolia thickets; while to the young girl's ear was wafted back the song:

"Fear not, fear not, one heart is true,
One arm will bear thee safely through;
One heart there beats so true and warm,
To guard thee from all ill and harm."

The tones died away in the distance, and all was still again; but the maiden's heart was troubled. The fierce threat of the despised and unsuccessful rival was fresh in her memory; not that she feared for herself, but, oh, if Pepe had told her truly when he said Julian would surely die if the commandante found him!

The assuring words of Nina—the poor, half-crazed creature, who, since the settlement had been founded, had wandered, unmolested—comforted her, and in a short time she fell into a quiet slumber, the words of the love-song chanted by the departing singer still ringing in her ears and coming again in her dreams.

CHAPTER III.

A ROGUES' COUNCIL.

"AND you consider this new fellow, Ricovi, trusty in every way, and sure never to turn traitor?"

"I do most certainly repose confidence in him."

The friends, Zarate and De Leon, sat alone in the room overlooking the bay; the same apartment from which, a few mornings since, the colonel had watched and waited the arrival of his messenger, Pepe. The habitual cigar was between the lips of either one, and both lay comfortably back in their chairs, watching the tiny smoke-wreaths, as they circled up and away. Although the block-house was Colonel Zarate's legitimate abode, nevertheless, an untenanted cottage facing the bay suited him better; and it was here that many hours were lazily spent when not engaged with his duties at the post.

In undress uniform the officers sat; each thinking, most probably, of the same thing.

"Yes, Antonio," said De Leon, again, after a somewhat lengthy pause—"yes, I would allow Ricovi to act as spy were I as sure of his worthiness as you say you are. He is cunning, crafty, and faithful. What more do you want?"

"True; no more. I am only suspicious of Ricovi, because I have been disappointed in Pinto. It is hardly doing the former justice, I admit, to doubt his ability; but this treason in

Pepe was so unexpected. I actually detected him in his baseness; I was at the cottage of the beautiful Helene when I heard his voice, and found him about to convey a billet to the hunter from his lady-love. Since then, I have learned that, for some time, when on errands for me, to discover Julian's hiding-place, he has served my lady by invariably carrying messages and what-not between them."

"So! I do not wonder you are suspicious. Anyhow, you can be revenged on Pepe; is he not a deserter, and, as one, liable to death if caught?"

"Yes, if caught; but I don't apprehend that. Before now, he has doubtless joined the hunter, and both will elude all vigilant search, I fear."

"True; for this St. John appears very retired in his habits."

"Therefore, I shall immediately send Ricovi out and try what can be done. I shall have Pinto arrested as a deserter, and, if caught, the hunter Julian can be taken and brought here under the pretext of aiding in the escape of a deserter from the Spanish arms. How's that?"

"Capital. What more?"

"I shall see Ricovi now, and give him his directions; this very night sees him on his way. Here, De Leon, a glass of sparkling wine to our success; the overthrow of the rival, and the speedy possession of the jewel, the Senorita Helene Valencia."

The brimming goblets were drained.

"And is this lady really so beautiful, Antonio? You know I have been here but a few months, and never yet have I been so fortunate as to catch a glimpse of her."

"Beautiful? That doesn't begin to express half her charms. I wish I could describe her; such hair and eyes— But, by my soul, that's she now! Do you see, coming down there by the magnolias? There, De Leon, what say you? Does 'beautiful' express it?"

De Leon's eyes were fixed with startling earnestness upon the unconscious passer-by.

"Dios de mi alma! Antonio, if I couldn't swear it were another!"

"Who? You mean, I suppose, that Spanish beauty there in Madrid?"

"The same, man! You sit there very coolly, however, while I am perfectly thunderstruck. I say, Antonio, the resemblance is positively fearful."

"Nonsense, fellow; just remember that Isabella and this lovely Helene, are both natives of the same soil; and besides there is always a great similarity between Spain's daughters."

"But this is unusual; of course you have noticed it before, haven't you? By the way, Zarate, how did you succeed with her?"

"With Isabella, you mean? Oh, married her, of course; a month of love and paradise, and that's the last I ever heard of her. I expect she is the wife of some Don or other, for her face might make her fortune—or break it, for that matter."

"So you were really married, eh? And the ceremony was valid?"

"To be sure; Isabella was too sharp to allow a strange priest to unite us, and so Father Joaquin performed the rite."

"I should think you would have been afraid to desert her as you did; besides, she would have proved a good wife, I think."

"Yes, so-so," drawled the commandante, relighting his cigar. "But, about that time I left Madrid, and, for seven years wandered here and there; then I joined the army and was stationed at Gibraltar nearly five years, when I was ordered to take command of a number of emigrants to Florida. So you see, even if I had feared La Senora Isabella's vengeance, I was quite secure, moving from place to place, as I did."

"Has this new lady-love of yours been in the place long?"

"Only since the last arrival of settlers—not more than a year, I think. But, De Leon, the day is passing rapidly on, and you know I must see Ricovi ere noon, so he may start at once. Send him to me immediately."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MEETING IN THE GLADE.

It was at the midnight hour, and the lovely night hung warm and pleasant. The full moon shone brightly down among the gloomy cypresses, and cast but a faintly-traceable shadow upon the greensward below. Stretched upon the soft earth was the figure of a man, of proportions at once firm and graceful. He was clad in a hunting-frock of dressed skin; his feet were covered with moccasins, and breeches of deer-skin enveloped his limbs. A rude cap, most probably manufactured by himself, lay under

his head, and his hand grasped the ready rifle, while a bright-gleaming knife lay across his thighs.

The face could be but dimly seen in the flickering moonlight, but the open, manly expression was plainly visible, and one would imagine the other features were not wanting in comeliness.

A step, so light as scarcely to be heard, fell upon the stillness of the night-air. The sleeper started to his feet; the slumber thus easily broken proving him accustomed to be ever on the alert, possibly ever in danger.

Another figure approached, and cautiously entered the gloomy dell.

"Ah, Pepe, it is you? I feared it was a stranger—probably a spy. When will the time come that I can lie down and repose in safety and quiet, and without my rifle for a companion and pistols for my pillow?"

"When you substitute a bunch of feathers for the last, and the lovely Helene for the first, friend Julian, and I fear not much sooner. But I have news."

"You have? What?"

"Colonel Zarate has another spy upon us—ostensibly to arrest me, *the deserter*, but really to take you; and you know death will be our lot if captured—mine for desertion; yours for aiding in my escape."

"Another spy, eh? Who is he, and how did you learn it?"

"One of the friends I have in the town told me he heard the commandante giving directions to a fellow from the block-house. He is not a soldier, but a sort of servant; his name is Ricovi."

"Not that man, surely! Why, Pepe, you know him?"

"Well—and to be the worst rogue living?"

"How can that be, when the colonel declares I am?"

A merry smile lighted the hunter's face for a moment.

"True; but the opinion of *one* does not make it so."

"Ricovi!" repeated Julian, musingly; and, as if he associated unpleasant recollections with the name, he grasped his rifle tightly.

"But, Julian, I must return to the cottage, and get back before dawn; so if you desire word sent, tell me now and let me be off."

A hurried message and a note were given to Pinto.

"Await the reply, and meet me in the ruins before sunrise."

Pepe departed with cautious tread, leaving Julian to snatch his light slumbers or pursue his way as he deemed best.

Swiftly but silently the deserter hastened on, keeping out of the brilliant moonlight, and carefully avoiding the open spaces. Two hours' walking brought him to the cottage; a few moments served to awaken the inmates and secure the requisite reply from Helene, and he immediately took his way back toward the appointed place of rendezvous.

He had retraced his steps nearly a mile, and was passing through a deep, dark cypress-glade, when a sound, as of an animal breaking its way through the underbrush, attracted his attention. Nearer it came, and louder grew the breaking of branches. Filled with apprehension, Pepe grasped his knife and looked to the priming of his rifle.

"It may be an animal; I think it is. No pursuer would walk as carelessly and noisily as that when searching for me. But, if it is a pursuer, if it should be Ricovi, his life or mine! Either my heart's blood or his shall be spilt ere Pepe Pinto is a prisoner!"

Suddenly the crackling sound ceased, and a deathlike silence reigned in the cypress dell. All was dim and dark, and Pinto's figure was scarcely visible in the midnight, but from the low, quick breathing one could tell of his eagerness and watchfulness.

Exactly opposite him, and not ten yards away, a dusky face peered through the natural thicket. In the darkness the bright eyes could not perceive the fugitive soldier standing so determinedly erect, but Pepe saw the gleam of those eyes, and, imagining them those of an animal, uttered a sigh of relief. The face was instantly withdrawn, for quick ears had heard the sound, which verified a former supposition.

"Hey! t'ought he in dar; sure now. Guess 'im don't know 'Covey so close by. Poor comp'ny better'n none, any way!"

The face and form were those of the spy, Ricovi, sent a short time before on his errand of blood and villainess. Gold was to be his reward, if successful, and a handful of the coin glittered in his belt, "just to feed his appetite," as Zarate had said, when he handed it to him,

with the promise of more when his task was successfully accomplished; and no more if otherwise. Consequently, in Ricovi he found a ready and willing tool—one who, if necessary would steep his hands in blood for "gold, gold;" or commit any crime to satisfy his avaricious thirst. Such a man—no, such a fiend—lay motionless and quiet upon the ground just outside the glade. His mind was intent upon securing the man inside; that was his errand, and he must accomplish it.

"Good for 'Covey! Catch 'im quick, too! Guess don't know spy at his heels. Hey, Mr. Julian, you're trapped."

Silently as a specter he arose and glided around to the spot where Pinto stood, still gazing at the place where the beaming eyeballs had peered through. Suddenly a weight, heavy and ponderous, felled him to the ground, and a wild yell rung in his ear.

"Hi-i-i, ole feller! Wonder who's got 'im now? Guess 'Covey kin ketch hunter, too, what help d'sert'r run away!"

Pepe made a desperate effort to free himself from the awkward position in which he lay. His face was toward the ground, and the huge, sharp knee of Ricovi pressed upon his back.

"Let go, you accursed rascal! Up, or I'll blow your brains out!"

"Will, eh! Let's see ye! Here's yer gun where I knocked him, and thar's yer knife where you frowed him. Hi-i-i! I got ye. Now I'm goin' to tote ye up to Pensacola."

"I am not Julian, the hunter; so you had better let me go at once."

"Don't fool this one, can tell ye! Think 'Covey so simple as b'lieve that?"

"No, you are far from being simple, and I commend you for your sharpness. But, truly, I am *not* the hunter you seek; I am a traveler through here, bound to the next village; but I know where this hunter is, for he crossed my path not an hour ago."

The politely-sincere—or apparently-sincere—speech of Pepe was not without its effect upon Ricovi. Doubt entered his mind, and he really wondered if this was true. Pinto could easily have proven his words, that he was not the hunter, as the reader knows; but, to have exposed his face would have been to sign his own death-warrant. For, though Ricovi might not have recognized Pepe's voice, still his face was familiar.

Pepe thought a moment.

"I have some gold. You may take it all if you will let me up. I am not he whom you seek; see, these hands are dark and toil-worn, and you know the hunter is fair. to look upon. Besides, suppose I were your enemy, see you not how powerless I am—all unarmed?"

He felt the heavy knee slightly raised.

"Gi' me gold now?"

"Yes; see here in this bag the bright pieces. Take them and let me hasten on."

The wily spy removed his weight, and Pepe sprang up, with only the rude grasp of the arm to remind him he was still a prisoner, until the lucre exchanged owners.

The money was Ricovi's, and Pepe was free. He darted for his trusty rifle, which lay already loaded on the earth, whither it had been thrown as Ricovi flung himself upon him unawares.

Still doubting the spy's honor, Pepe kept one eye upon him as he bent to secure his rifle; and well for him that he did; for the treacherous rogue intended no such good luck to Pinto as escape. So the moment his face was averted, he sprang toward him, but not in time; for Pepe saw his maneuver, and turning suddenly, the blow which was intended for the back of Pinto's head, fell wide of its mark, and Ricovi pitched sprawling on the ground. Quick as a dart, the deserter's knee was planted on his breast.

"Villain, now who is in your power? Fool, dolt, to think to outwit Pepe Pinto! Yes, stare and gaze; it is I, the deserter! Now, go to your master, the noble, the gallant commandante, and tell him of this. Go, for I scorn to take the worthless life from one who could contemplate the cowardly deed you did!"

He had disarmed the spy, who sprang up, and, ere Pinto could give him the parting salute he intended—a sound kick—was out of the glade, and crushing through the underbrush in the direction of Pensacola.

Pepe stood a moment. Light was just dawning in the east, and warned him to pursue his way, ere seen by those who might not prove too friendly.

Gathering up his gun and knife, he rapidly pursued an exactly opposite course to that the spy had taken, resolved to keep his appointment at the ruins, whither Julian had gone!

CHAPTER V.

THE CHIEF'S PROMISE.

A SOLITARY light burned dimly in an upper room, and gleaming out in the darkness, rendered the black night doubly gloomy.

Without, the murky clouds went scudding across the sky, and the waves of the usually placid bay came beating and dashing, flecked with angry foam, against the hard foundation of the block-house.

It was Antonio Zarate sitting in the upper room, where the faint candle-gleams vainly tried to throw a satisfactory glow upon the note he was reading, probably for the fortieth time. Near him sat a rough, villainously-visaged man, his elf-locks hanging wildly over his face. By the uncertain glare, Ricovi looked more the fiend than man.

"And you found this note on Pinto's person after you knocked him senseless?"

"Yes; we fit some time 'fore he caved; then, when he keeled over, I just s'arched his person, and cum acrost thet thar. Preshus poor pick-in's, too!"

"There were no valuables or money?"

"Nary an onza!" chuckled the liar, while his hands rested in his pocket on the well-filled pouch.

Again Zarate perused the note, now torn and soiled. It was very brief:

"MY JULIAN—(so it ran)—Pepe waits while I reply; I cannot commit my thoughts to paper here, but meet me on Tuesday night at the orange bower, just before midnight. Then I will tell you all. Till then, my own noble Julian, farewell, and may good angels guard you. H. V."

The habitual scowl on Zarate's face was replaced by an eager, satisfied expression, as he read the lines, and an inward chuckle denoted his delight. He arose and looked out of the window.

"The night is dark, but good for our purpose. Bring the horses to the door immediately, and we will be off. Remember, not a syllable of this, or—" and he touched the hilt of his sword.

A few seconds and the commandante and Ricovi were riding fast and furious from the sleeping village, plunging through the gloomy forests, or speeding along the open highways. One hour's ride brought them to their destination, and they dismounted, tying their beasts securely to a stout sapling.

It was a wild plain, deep in the apparently inaccessible center of a wood, and the storm-laden wind, as it whistled shrilly through the shivering tree-tops, rendered the gloom trebly dismal.

Before them stood a small Indian lodge, the rays from a brightly-glowing fire gleaming into the dark night from between the irregular interstices of skins which served as door. The strong perfume of the inmate's pipe came unpleasantly out, and while the fastidious Zarate could not repress a sniff of disgust at the rather too odoriferous scent, Ricovi shrugged his gaunt shoulders and smiled, if a contortion of such distorted features could be called such.

"Very good; he is in good 'umor when he smokes *that* pipe."

Another moment and the two were within the lodge, and the bear-skin fell between them and the gloomy night.

Squatted before the fire, on a soft mat, his imperturbable countenance gazing stolidly in its bright embers, was the Indian.

Once high in authority among his tribe, Tullona was once loved, revered and honored. In the discussion around the council-fire, the first voice was his; in the treaty-smoke, Tullona's lips first touched the pipe. But, he had fallen from his high position, and now was an outcast from his kindred, a solitary wanderer, making his home now in the wilds of the woods, now in some hidden cave; lost to honor and right, Tullona was a fit tool for any evil.

Among his dusky warrior brethren, he was an object of disgust, contempt and dislike; and in his turn he hated, with all the fury of an Indian hatred, the whole tribe.

When the two men, Zarate and Ricovi, entered his tent, Tullona gave no indication of his knowledge of their presence; and, not till Ricovi addressed him, did he turn his piercing eyes from the fire to his visitors.

"Chieftain," said Ricovi, for he knew it would flatter his vanity to address him thus, "Chieftain, the great soldier of Peracoly is here and wants to say sum'thin' to ye. Will the Injun listen?"

This ludicrous intermingling of bad English, with an attempt at the beautiful Indian language, had no effect upon Tullona other than to cause his eyes to search the colonel's face.

He looked inquiringly at the officer.

"Tullona, we came to-night on business of great importance; a mission is to be accomplished that none but a brave warrior can successfully perform; and that is why we seek the Indian chief, knowing his heart is strong and his arm unflinching."

He paused to note the effect of this flattery. A low "Ugh" issued from Tullona's lips.

"Besides, the man who goes on this mission must have close lips and a silent tongue; the chieftain understands; will he undertake the task? Gold will be the reward, and a huge skin of fire-water: much tobacco, too."

Tullona's eyes glistened as he spoke.

"Gold, rum, tobacco?"

"Yes, all these to the Indian if he consents."

"And does the soldier want Tullona's hands to be dyed in red blood before he can get these things?"

"Oh, no—no, indeed. There is no murder, although the warrior chief is brave enough; but you will need no arrow or gun."

The Indian gazed curiously.

In brief words Zarate explained the nature of the mission; told him of the girl he loved, and of the meeting in the orange thicket; instructed him what he should do and where to take her.

Tullona consented.

"But the soldier says the forest-maiden has a lover; who is he, that I may strike him from my path?"

"The pale-faced hunter is Julian St. John, the American."

Like a sudden flash of midsummer lightning breaking from a black, heavy cloud, gleamed a fierce, desperate expression upon the stolid features of the fallen brave. His savage ire was aroused, and he grasped the handle of his long, murderous knife.

"Julian, eh? *Him* strong friend to Indians; Tullona hates his brethren, but Julian is their friend. The white hunter is a great brother to Minoni. The Indian would murder Minoni, and his friend, the hunter, too!"

"Then Tullona will come to the village when the sun goes down again, and Ricovi will accompany him to the spot."

Consenting willingly, and the bargain closed, the two midnight visitors had no further business, so they left the deer-skin lodge, and plunged on as best they might through the dark night.

They had ridden but a little distance when Zarate suddenly drew up his horse.

"Hist, Ricovi; something or some one is surely following us; I distinctly hear footsteps. Listen."

For a moment both strained their ears and eyes to no purpose. In the midnight blackness not an object was visible, and only the moaning of the wind disturbed the silence.

"Nothing there, anyhow," was Ricovi's consolatory reply.

A half-hour's brisk riding brought them to the edge of the wood, where, putting the spur to their horses, they dashed into the open road. As they left the dense growth of thicket behind them, Zarate glanced back. The first faint gleam of gray dawn sufficed to show a figure, silently standing on the extreme edge of the forest; it was a woman's form, and clad in somber black. For a moment it stood peering toward the horsemen; then raising a long, black-draped arm, pointed backward in the direction they had come; then, as if by magic, disappeared.

Twenty minutes after the colonel and his attendant fiend dismounted at the gates of the block-house.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOST MISSIVE.

It wanted yet but two hours of sunrise; the storm had spent itself, and the coming day, already faintly glimmering in a cold, gray east, gave promise of bright sunshine.

Away from the village of Pensacola, not more than a mile, stood the ruins of what was once a guard-house. The spot was a wild one, and the remains of the building were hidden from the main road by a thick growth of trees and bushes. No one, in passing by, would have dreamed of its existence.

It was here, in anxious impatience, that Julian St. John, the noted hunter, awaited the coming of Pepe Pinto, whom he had left some hours before—Pepe to return to Pensacola and seek Helene; Julian to repair to the ruins, there to await the messenger who was to bring a message from his lady-love. He was pacing rapidly backward and forward, his face betokening his anxiety. In personnel, the hunter

was pleasing. His was an open brow, high, and, despite exposure, white and smooth. Waving hair of mellow brown curled down almost to his neck; and his restless, roving eyes, that could look so tenderly upon the little Spanish maiden, were beautiful in their clear, deep azure tint.

"Oh, this life I lead: so hunted and lonely. What am I that I should bring all this upon myself? Am I a murderer, with my hands imbued in a fellow-mortal's life-blood, that I am sought for with such vigilance? Am I a convict, eluding the justice of the law, that I am driven and hunted? No; only a peaceable, quiet citizen; and *my crime*, my awful sin against the noble authorities of Pensacola is, *I am a rival of the colonel*; a successful rival; and for loving and being loved am hunted like a felon, and followed up like a robber."

His soliloquy was cut short by the entrance of his messenger. The hunter's eye brightened, and he grasped the youth by the hand.

"Safe; and Helene, Pepe—she is well and sends me a message?"

"Yes, well, and sends a love-token. Just wait a moment and you shall have it: it is down here."

He unfastened his belt and took it off. First in one pocket, then in another he searched, but no note made its appearance.

In silence Julian awaited.

"Well, now, where *did* I put it? I am sure it was in my belt, or else—*My God, Julian, 'twas in the wallet along with the gold!*"

"What if it was, man? Isn't it just as safe there? But, hasten, I am all impatience to read it."

"Julian, Julian, she is lost—lost, and I am the cause! Oh, kill me, shoot me, any thing to punish my foolish carelessness!"

Julian felt a vague terror.

"What is it, man? Pepe, friend, tell me, tell me, *who* is lost? For the love of Heaven, what is the cause of your grief?"

In words of anguish and remorse, Pepe related the adventure in the cypress-glade, just before the storm came up, as he was returning from the village to rejoin Julian at the ruins; how he bribed the villain by giving him the pouch of gold, forgetting he had placed the note there when he started from the maiden's cottage.

Feverishly Julian listened.

"But, Pepe, supposing Ricovi *did* carry the note to Zarate, what harm could it do? The colonel knows we are lovers, and it can give no clew to our whereabouts?"

"True—true; but I forgot to tell you what was in the note. When the lady Helene handed it to me, she said, 'Read, Pepe.' I glanced over it, and, oh, Julian, that loving note will, I fear, be the ruin of the fair girl, unless we can avert it. *It appointed a place and hour for an interview: 'Midnight, Tuesday—orange thicket,'* and, Julian, just as sure as Colonel Zarate sees that note, just so sure will he be there and abduct her!"

Pinto groaned aloud, while Julian St. John's eyes flashed, and his nostrils quivered in agony and deadly hatred, mingled with fear for his betrothed's safety.

"And what can we do? We *must* do something, and, instantly, too, for this is Tuesday, and to-night, this night, may see her—"

"Pepe," interrupted Julian, his voice strangely tense and low, "Pepe, my friend, my brother, we must save her. We *will*, even if our lives pay the forfeit. Think, and try to discover some feasible plan."

In silence the two resumed their walk, and the sun rose and mounted high in the heavens ere either spoke; then it was Julian.

"I can conceive no plan save going boldly to her cottage. I know it will be my death; but what is that to—"

"The Forest-Bird's lover shall not risk his life. What would the maiden do when the white hunter died?"

A voice, musical and low startled them, and in a second a woman, her long, lustrous hair flowing far below her waist, entered the umbrageous doorway and stood before them.

"Ah, Nina—it was you who spoke just now?"

"Yes, Nina bade the white hunter not risk his life."

"But do you know the lovely forest-maiden's life—ay, her honor, is in jeopardy, and then tell me not to risk *my* poor life?"

"I know the night-hawk is about to pounce down; I know the one with the serpent-smile and the fascinating face seeks to destroy the maiden; but yet I would command that you risk not the life so precious to the beautiful daughter of Spain."

"Nina, I am surprised. I surely thought you loved the Senorita Helene better than to—"

"And the hunter—he of the warm heart and stout arm—he that Nina thought had much reason—thinks that no one else can go and tell the maiden?"

"True, good woman; many might be sent; but how can I trust any one for this mission?"

"Nina is the maiden's true friend; *she* will go, and the Forest-Bird will yet sing in the hunter's cabin. Trust the poor, crazed wanderer, for love makes her mind strong, and she can work wisely. Fear not, lover of the singing-maiden; but tarry here until I come again, and I will bring good tidings. Remember that the night-hawk with the hidden claws shall not steal the song-bird!"

The mysterious creature walked slowly, and in dignified silence, away.

"Thank God, Pinto—thank God! Helene is safe—safe!"

"What, Julian—you don't depend on that crazy creature's words?"

"As I would upon an angel's promise! You don't know her, Pepe, but I have often proved her truthfulness, and many a favor she has done me."

"But who is she?"

"That I know not, for she always goes by the name of 'Nina.' She is a strange, mysterious creature, but fondly attached to Helene. Her face I never saw, for you see her long hair falls nearly over it."

"And you really intend trusting 'Nina,' as you call her, and waiting here till she comes again?"

"Indeed, I shall—gladly wait and thankfully trust."

CHAPTER VII.

A WARNING.

MADAME VALENCIE and Helene sat together by the vine-embowered casement that overlooked the fragrant little garden, in the midst of which stood their humble cottage. Both were busily engaged in sewing, and as their fingers were swiftly flying, they conversed:

"Mamma, it is very strange, isn't it, that she should take such an interest in us. What can I have done?"

"Us," you say. Who? You and I?"

"Oh, no: you know I didn't mean that. Julian and I!"

Her pure cheek blushed delicately.

Madame Valencie smiled mischievously.

"Now, mamma, it is too bad in you to make sport that way; but then it is nothing but sport after all. Oh, did you see Pepe Pinto last night—or rather this morning—when he came? You surely must have heard him, at any rate."

"I did hear a slight noise about two o'clock; was it then?"

"Yes; and he brought me a note from Julian."

"Julian is safe and well, I hope? Oh, Helene, my child, how unfortunate that he should be an enemy to our commanding authorities here!"

"But, mamma, I don't understand how, for personal reasons, Colonel Zarate can track him thus, and publicly hunt him. I know he has committed no act which justifies such treatment."

"True, child; but you little know the ways of the world. Senor Zarate, you know, has complete authority to arrest both Pepe Pinto and Julian St. John—one for desertion, the other for aiding him; and, in my inmost heart, I believe the commandante rejoices that he has so plausible an excuse for capturing the hunter."

"So do I; and, mark me, mamma, he will leave no stone unturned that may lead to his arrest."

Madame Valencie sighed, but made no reply.

"Mamma," continued Helene, "it is nearly a month, now, since Julian has dared to be seen in public; why is this?"

"Child, you know of Zarate's jealousy—of his hatred toward your lover; Julian knows this, too; and he also knows, as do I, that a secret foe is more to be feared than an open enemy. Many are the ways in which the colonel commanding might remove his hated rival from his path; spies, servile to their master; servants brought from Spain, and accustomed to such deeds, can be employed. Julian knows this, and his better judgment counsels him to use discretion."

"But the villagers know not the cause of his protracted absence. Of course, they imagine him on hunting-expeditions, do they not?"

"They may have thought so; but now, you know, Zarate makes no secret of his intentions of capturing him on the grounds I mentioned, and has even sent out squads of men after him."

"Heaven will preserve him to guard me!" murmured the fair girl.

"Let us hope so, at least," was madame's fervent assent.

Helene leaned her head on her hand and gazed out the window; for a long time she remained so silent, that her companion addressed her:

"What is it, daughter, that occupies your mind?"

"Oh, mamma," burst impetuously from her lips, "why did we leave Spain—lovely Spain—for this horrid country? Were we not happy there, in our cozy little home? Oh, that we were back again!"

"And Julian?" softly whispered the lady.

"True, dear mamma; I never would have known him had we remained there, and I am sure I couldn't leave him now. But, why did we come?"

"It was necessary, child."

Madame Valencie's tone was chilling, and Helene refrained from asking more. Another silence followed. Suddenly the maiden spoke:

"Mamma, there is one thing that has often surprised me; it is this: the unusual love I feel for that poor unfortunate Nina. It may be pity, it may be strong friendship; but, whenever I see her, I can scarcely refrain from throwing my arms around her and resting my head on her bosom. Oh, I am sure I do love her very much; more than any one!"

"Helene," said the lady, gazing reproachfully at the eager, flushed face of the young girl—"my child, more than me?"

There was something inexpressibly tender in Madame Valencie's tone.

"Forgive me, dearest mamma, for saying it. How cruel it was in me! More than you? As if"—her cheeks grew still more scarlet, and her eye brighter—"as if I could love *any* one more than you! But I can't explain it. Oh, sometimes—indeed, I cannot help it, mamma, and you *must* forgive me for it—but when I think of poor Nina, so lonely and sad, and so beautiful and learned, my heart goes right out to her in such great love—a great deal stronger than I ever felt for you!"

She buried her burning cheeks in her hands, as though she anticipated the lady's displeasure. Madame Valencie smiled sadly upon the bowed head, and a strange expression passed over her face—an expression at once tender and compassionate; but no word escaped her lips, and she lovingly caressed the bended head.

Helene looked up, the tears trembling on her lashes.

"Mamma, you are not angry? I did not vex you?"

She kissed the ripe lips, and whispered an assuring reply.

"The lovely flower is bended to the ground with the dew, but Nina will show a sunbeam that shall dry the drops, and the maiden's heart will be joyful again."

In the doorway, tall and commanding, stood the wan figure of the wandering Nina; her beautiful tresses falling, as usual, over her face, almost concealing the features and completely disguising the expression. The large, mournful eyes gazed sadly out, being the only feature visible.

At the sound of her voice, Helene and the lady turned quickly around, the warm blood rushing to the young girl's face as she saw the tender glance of the lustrous, gentle eyes, so piercingly dark, yet liquidly sweet.

"Fair maiden, Nina's heart is made glad today; and the flower of love is springing up, for the first time in many years. A long while poor Nina has been a wanderer, with no one to love her, none to cherish her and comfort her. Once I—the crazy Nina—had a pleasant home and a daughter—oh, Forest-Bird, a darling daughter—fair as the morn and gentle as a gazelle. But she was gone, one day, and the sharp sword of sorrow rent in twain my heart, and my brain grew hot—hotter than fire. Then, poor, lonely Nina started and determined to find her lost birdling; but all she found was, one morning, a little grave in the forest, and they said they put my little song-bird in there, long ago. So I wander all over, now; for Nina has no home, and wants none but the blue heaven, where her darling is, and the green earth, where they laid her away."

The low, musical voice ceased, and a great sob burst from Helene's bosom. Madame Valencie smoothed the excited girl's hair, and, her eyes dreamily roaming over the room, the poor woman spoke again, in the same touching way:

"The lovely bird of the forest says she has a great love for the wanderer. Nina heard her say it. Nina's heart springs up fresh and young again, as in the days when her own babe lay on

her bosom. Will the gentle girl come and let Nina kiss her only once, just for the sake of the lost one?"

With a passionate cry, Helene flew to her, and twining her arms tightly about her, buried her head in her bosom.

"Does Nina love my daughter so much, then?" inquired Madame Valencie, as she gravely noted their actions. How Helene's heart beat as she listened for the reply, while a vague feeling of something—she knew not what, thrilled through her.

"I do; because she is young and tender, as was my own lamb. Yes, Nina will ever be the forest-lily's true friend."

A pang of disappointment quivered through Helene's form, and she resumed her chair by the window. The visitor's mood changed as suddenly.

"The night-hawk is ready to swoop down upon the defenseless birdling."

"What—not again?" asked senora, who readily understood the figurative language.

"Nina says it—then is it not truth?" demanded she, in a dignified tone.

"Of course, good woman, I do not doubt it, and only meant what I said as an expression of surprise."

"Tuesday night, 'midnight,' the maiden knows?"

Helene turned in astonishment at the woman's words.

"How did you ascertain that?"

"Aha, Nina found it out! Nina spies when no one imagines it. But, the Forest-Bird *must* not go!"

"Must not go where? I can not understand."

It was the senora who spoke.

"She knows; the lily understands if you do not. Nina says, not go!"

"Why?—will you tell me?"

"The white hunter, he of the strong arm and stout heart, will not come; he knows the danger, for I told him. I know how the prowling vulture will wait for the dove, when the innocent bird goes to meet her true love. Nina followed his steps—the steps of the man with the rare face and serpent tongue, and she heard them talk; she saw the tent in the woods, and heard the false men talk. Nina knows, and the maiden must not—*shall* not go; but the lover—just at midnight, when the air is cool and the moon is down, so they can not see him—the lover will *here* keep his tryst, and fold his love in his arms."

None of the three spoke for a second; then the woman asked:

"Will she promise not to go?"

Helene hesitated. The weird words held her in awe, and she feared to doubt them.

"Does the forest-lily heed Nina's warning, and will she give her the promise? Nina must have a speedy reply, for she must go and tell the hunter to come *here* at midnight. He will explain it all better than Nina can."

The promise was given, and, laden with the message, the strange creature set out on her toilsome way to the ruins, there to find the two refugees.

"Nina wants no thanks," was her imperious reply, when both Julian and Pinto would have deluged her with grateful words. "Nina does her *duty*; her reward is *here*," laying her hand over her heart. Again, as in the morning, she quietly, silently left them.

The setting sun, bathing the world in a radiant array of purple and golden glory, sunk calmly into the placid waters of Pensacola Bay; the warm, lingering brilliancy faded slowly away over the green savannas, and floated around the mist-topped hills; one by one the laughing stars dimpled forth, and the stately moon rose, in silver coolness, from the same waves beneath which so short a time before, the golden orb of day had disappeared. For a short time fair Luna regaled the earth with her brightest smiles, then, slowly and peacefully, retired behind the hills, leaving the myriads of twinkling stars alone with the night.

It was just at this hour that Julian and Pepe left their retreat at the ruins, and cautiously pursued the path toward the cottage.

For a half-mile they journeyed in company; then Pepe, leaving Julian to go on alone, turned aside into a by-path, and struck out in an opposite direction. By a circuitous route, Pepe reached a secluded spot, not a quarter of a mile from the cottage. This spot was an *orange thicket*; the place mentioned in the ill-fated note as the trysting-place. Here it was that Pinto resolved to wait until midnight to see if his surmises and suspicions concerning Zarate's motives were correct. Climbing to the top of a dense, spreading tree, he found a comfortable

place astride two branches, where he prepared to watch and wait.

Julian, meanwhile, journeyed along unmolested to the cottage of Helene, his heart beating high with anticipation. Nearly a fortnight had elapsed since he had seen her, and that, to lovers, is an age. His footsteps grew quicker and lighter, and as he reached the cottage, a bright light cheered him on to his loved one's side.

A low knock at the outer door startled the inmates.

"Oh, mamma, it is Julian!" and she flew to open the door.

A warm, passionate embrace, fond kisses for Helene. A respectful salute to Senora Valencie, who in sympathetic remembrance of former days, when *she* was in love, discreetly left the room on some trifling errand, leaving the delighted lovers alone to enjoy their greatest happiness—each other's congenial society.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BROKEN TRYST.

At the same moment that Julian and Pinto started from the ruins, the former to visit his lady-love the latter to lurk in the orange-thicket, a party of four men sat in the cottage of Antonio Zarate, in the upper apartment, commanding a view of the bay; the same room our readers have already once or twice visited.

The principal personages were two officers, arrayed in all the elegance of full-uniform, even to the stylish crimson sash of finest silken texture, and glittering sword, dangling at their sides. They were Colonel Zarate and De Leon.

At a table, on which was a limited quantity of liquors—just enough not to make the imbibers drunk, and consequently useless—sat two men, playing a game of dice. By each one's elbow stood a half-filled decanter of the treacherous rum; and between almost every "throw" they stopped to quaff a draught of the poison. One was the part-human, part-fiendish creature, Ricovi; the other, Tullona, the disgraced and dishonored chief of the Yamassees.

In a corner of the room leaned two rifles, and at the belts of the players hung long, glittering knives; both were attired without much regard to fashion and taste; Ricovi's suit being a simple coat and pants of army brown, dingy and faded. Tullona, however, with a lingering love for the olden time when he was one of the highest in rank among his brother warriors, still preserved some of the peculiarities of the picturesque Indian costume.

A blanket, coarse and filthy, edged with a torn, moth-eaten fringe, fell from his broad shoulders, and over the rude breeches, made of the same rough material, a loose covering of skin, almost devoid of fur, enveloped his tawny feet; on his head he wore a strange-looking contrivance, half-hunter style; an otter-skin, hard and dry, was arranged in a sort of cap, the tail hanging over his shoulders.

And these two perverted specimens of humanity were the tools selected by a Christian man in his dastard work of dishonor and crime.

"It lacks but two and a half hours of midnight, and I think it would be better for them to start at once. Don't you?"

Zarate consulted his watch.

"Perhaps they had better be moving; I will tell them."

"Tullona," said he, crossing the room to the table where the Indian sat, "the time is come for you to start on your errand of secrecy and trust. Go now, and ere the midnight hour is long past I shall expect the brave warrior back, laden with his prize. Bring the maiden here, safe and sacred, then shall the promised reward be Tullona's."

Shouldering their arms, Ricovi and his companion, no longer the retired, quiet, stolid chief, but noisy, talkative and boisterous, started out, accompanied to the gate by the commandante and De Leon. Into the open roads they took their way, the dim light from the stars barely serving to guide them.

"White man walk first—show Tullona the way."

"Don't know the way, eh? Jest foller yer nose, an' ye'll come to it!"

The Indian made no reply, for the cool night air calmed down his previous excitement while drinking the fiery water, and he was becoming more reserved and silent.

"Got any more drink, eh?" inquired Ricovi.

"Drink," repeated the Indian, contemptuously. "Is fire-water all the brown face thinks about?"

Ricovi regarded him with a ridiculous grin.

"Guess Injun wouldn't 'fect to a little if could git 'im, eh?"

No reply being made, and Ricovi not speaking, the two walked on until they reached the margin of the woods. Here they paused and looked carefully about them.

"This place," grunted Ricovi. "Come in yere; I show ye."

"Tullona needs no showing. He is at home in the great woods. The brown-face is a fool not to know that."

"Who says 'Covy's fool? Injun rascal?"

Tullona turned upon him, and raised his knife warningly.

"The brown-face must keep a civil tongue, or—"

Ricovi followed the gleam of his flashing orbs, and they rested on the glittering knife-blade.

By this time the two marauders had penetrated into the wood a good distance, and were now so near the orange-thicket that the sound of their footsteps crushing the twigs and snapping the low bushes was distinctly audible to the ear of the hidden spy, Pepe Pinto, 'way up on his leafy perch.

From his perch he listened to the approach of Tullona and Ricovi. Not long did he wait for them, for a few seconds after, they entered the thicket. He recognized Ricovi's voice.

"Not been here yet; not time for half-hour. Come, Injun, we'll hide, then catch 'er when is going back. Here."

"Tullona can find a place without the brown-face's help. Tullona will sit here."

In grim quiet he seated himself upon the grass behind a thick tuft of orange-blossoms. Ricovi, meanwhile, had discovered a rather low tree, in which he climbed.

"When girl comes, 'Covy 'll wait till starts for home, then run down, catch her; me and Injun carry to Pensacola; git lots o' drink and much gold."

"Will the foolish-mouthed boy keep still? or else how can the bird be caged?" The Indian spoke severely.

With stoical patience the two abductors waited the hour of twelve—long past that time, and still they waited; but no maiden, and no lover.

Until the first faint tracings of dawn were visible they sat; then, in disappointed ill-humor retraced the way to their master.

Pepe Pinto, too, when they were gone, came down from his perch, fully convinced of Zarate's desperate designs. He shouldered his rifle, and plunging into the woods, as yet scarcely lighted by the first rays of coming day, returned to the hidden covert, the retreat in the woods, of himself and Julian St. John.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EBON MASK.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, and the two friends, De Leon and Zarate, sat in their room smoking their cigars, and awaiting the return of the men dispatched on their errand of crime.

"I wonder what detains them; it is long past midnight now; surely they should be back by this time."

"Hardly, I think," remarked De Leon, tapping his cigar against the window to remove the ashes. "Remember, the girl was not to be there before midnight; and two hours—for it is scarcely more than that—are a short time to accomplish such an errand."

"You are right, but I do wish they would return."

"Curb your impatience, man; and console yourself with the thought of how well worth waiting two years, much more two hours, the fair Helene is."

"Isn't she, though? Really now, De Leon, don't you feel the least envious?"

De Leon laughed.

"A poor devil like me, Zarate, on such large pay, can scarce be supposed to indulge in a taste for such adventures, let alone participate in them."

The colonel smiled and stroked his unexceptionable mustache.

"By the by, comrade, did you know she resembles that Spanish lady of yours most fearfully?"

"Pshaw, De Leon; you are possessed about her. Why, man, isn't it perfectly natural that these two, Helene and Isabella, both being natives of the same sunny land, and even both born on the same beauteous river-bank, the famed Gaudalquivir, should possess the same general resemblance?"

"Granted; but Antonio, the resemblance is more than general, it is particular; strikingly so. Heigh-ho, what o'clock might it be? Three, and nearly dawn, as I live!"

"And they not back with her yet! By St.

Genevieve, comrade, what *can* have happened to detain them?"

A reply was prevented by the sudden entrance of the two men, Tullona and Ricovi. The colonel sprung to their side, and in eager tones cried:

"Helene, the lady—where is she?"

De Leon's quicker eye had noticed the disappointment and mortification depicted on the faces of the unsuccessful messengers, and at a glance divined the state of affairs.

The Yamassee replied to Zarate's question.

"No lady; the midnight meeting was not there."

"What, you have not brought her?"

"Could Tullona bring what was not to be brought?"

His voice betrayed slight anger.

"Ricovi, what is it? Tell me; did not Helene and the hunter come to the orange-thicket?"

"No; 'Covy and Injun waited long, but no lovers; guess deserter Pinto tell hunter not come."

"Sure enough; of course, colonel, some one must have warned them; but, it is aggravating to think that all this time spent in waiting by us, has most probably been occupied by the lovers in each other's presence; for, mark me, Antonio, they would scarcely be cheated out of this interview, and to lovers, you know, one place is as good as another."

A frown settled on the baffled villain's face, and a scowl darkened his countenance.

"You may go," he said, abruptly, to the men in waiting. "Ricovi, take Tullona to the sergeant's quarters, and you will find plenty of liquor; here is the money. Now go."

Striding angrily up and down the room, his disappointed villainy plainly visible in his face, and scarce able to repress his intense rage, the commandante looked more a fiend than a man.

"Curses on the fellow!" burst from his compressed lips.

"Who—Julian St. John?" carelessly inquired De Leon.

"Yes, Julian St. John. But for him—ah, when I once lay hands on him 'twill be to hang him high as Haman!"

"So would I, colonel," assented De Leon, consolingly. "But I must leave you, *mon amigo*; 'tis dawn and no sleep has visited my eyes for many hours. So, *buenas noches*."

Left to his own reflections, Zarate felt any thing but comfortable, and for a few moments paced the floor in angry excitement. Through the window faintly stole the very earliest streaks of dawn, so faint that objects in the room were undistinguishable. Tossing aside his nearly consumed cigar, and removing the superfluous military sword, sash and coat, the commandante wrapped a blanket about him, and lay down upon the floor to secure, if possible, some sleep, ere the duties of the day began.

He had lain but a few moments when the door quietly but softly opened, and a figure draped in unrelieved black, entered the room. Closing the door, it advanced toward the officer, and when near the center of the apartment stopped and stood in awful dignity.

Zarate sprung to his feet, and, spell-bound with surprise, not to say fear, gazed at the mysterious figure.

"Colonel Zarate," came in full, melodious tones from the draped form, "who and what I am you know not. I come on an errand of mercy, and shall not retire till I accomplish my business. Listen. Last night an attempt was made by you to carry away from a loved mother and a pleasant home, to dishonor and corruption, a fair girl, the pride of her friends, the idol of a true, noble lover. Through my agency she escaped her doom; I it was who heard through an indirect way of your plans; I, whom you fancied you heard in the forest when you were returning from your diabolical errand; and I, too, 'Leota of the Ebon Mask,' am she whom you saw on the edge of the woods."

The lady paused, but remained motionless as a statue. Gathering courage from her very human style of address and refined language—for Zarate had at first thought her a black demon—the astonished man replied:

"Well, woman, whoever and whatever you are, what business have you here at this time, and in an officer's private apartment? Be gone!"

"Be courteous, senor; remember you address a lady; and you know, for gallantry, the colonel commanding professes to have no equal, although he seems to have forgotten that fact."

"Silence. Your story of abducting a 'fair girl' as you say, is a base fabrication, without foundation or truth—a foul lie, by whom, or

for what purpose invented, I know or care not. So, woman, I demand that you leave my presence instantly, with your masked face."

"Leota obeys; but before I accept your polite invitation, listen."

She glided forward and placing her mouth to his ear, uttered in distinct tones the single word:

"Isabella!"

Pale and trembling, the commandante heard it.

"Surely, senor, your memory is not so treacherous as to forget your wife, whom years ago you left alone, weeping and mourning for a miscreant husband, on the banks of the beauteous Gaudalquivir? Ah, I see you do remember; and, senor, by the memory you entertain of that injured wife, by the terror you now feel, the fear from which you can not flee, I command you to desist in your attempt upon the happiness, safety and honor of Helene Valencie. Remember, at your peril you disobey me; and know, too, the time will come when *Isabella* shall be avenged!"

The graceful figure quietly withdrew, leaving the bewildered soldier in an agony of terror and rage. And "Leota, of the Ebon Mask" disappeared as mysteriously as she came.

CHAPTER X.

THE STRUGGLE.

Two miles south of the village of Pensacola, and half a mile east of the road that leads to the bay, are two adjacent bodies of water, the former lying immediately south of the latter, with which it forms a communication at high tide.

Between these two bayous or ponds extends a marsh, low and swampy, filled with noxious weeds and poisonous shrubs; one of the many such spots so frequently found in the wilds of Florida. On the west of this almost wholly impassable marsh, there juts forward a narrow neck of land: to the south it runs off into a series of small rocks, sharp and irregular, before which and hiding them is a dense mass of trees—dark, gloomy cypresses—whose dismal shade renders the spot trebly wild and lonely.

Following the narrow, rocky path, bordered on one side by the marsh, and on the other by ledge upon ledge of sharp precipitous crags, for the distance of one hundred yards, a large cavern is found, formed by the overhanging cliffs. The entrance is entirely hidden by a clump of trees, and the gray sides, rough and impassable, resemble a huge rock rising abruptly from the water below. In front the cave-roof is nearly twenty feet from the base; wide and capacious, it would have afforded a comfortable shelter for many persons.

Entering the cavern, and approaching the other extremity, the space gradually narrowed until, after a distance of thirty or forty feet, the cold, stony sides of the cavern almost touched each other. But this was not the end; for, after a narrow passage of some ten or twelve yards between the scarcely-divided rocks, the walls suddenly diverged, and another cavern, about half the size of the first, opened to the view. Upon the floor of this rearmost cave were spread blankets and strips of coarse mats; upon the sharp, projecting spurs of rock, all around the sides, hung various articles—knives, rifles, skins, clothing and dried meats. A large skin-bag, filled with water, stood in one corner of the apartment, and near by, on a rude table, constructed by laying a rough board across two upright sticks, which were insecurely thrust into two chance crevices in the irregular flooring, were the remains of a simple meal, if the few crumbs of bread and potatoes, and the contents of a partly-emptied coffeepot, unenriched by milk and guiltless of sugar, can be called such.

Evidently, then, this apparently inaccessible retreat was inhabited, and by human beings, and civilized. Even so; this wild, solitary spot was the home and retreat of the hunter and his friend. Julian St. John and Pepe Pinto abode together there—lived in security, for few knew of the place—so few that it was entirely forgotten.

From the brow of this mighty natural pile of rocks, screened on the one hand by the dense foliage of overhanging trees, on the other by the high vertical projection of the same cavern that afforded them a shelter, Pepe watched the coming of Julian. Nearly two hours had elapsed since the hunter had been gone, and his promise was to return ere nightfall. That hour had come and almost passed, and the dark evening shades were gathering closer and denser.

"I wonder what can detain him? Heaven guard him safely back."

A low crushing through the bushes caught his attentive ear, and he grasped his rifle tightly. Peering cautiously around, he endeavored to discover the cause, but was unable. Suddenly, however, a dark, beautiful face shone through the thicket.

Pinto raised his rifle.

"Who comes? A friend? If not, I fire!"

The figure came slowly into view.

"The white hunter's friend would shoot poor Nina?"

"Never, my good woman; but one must be cautious, you know."

"Yes, one must be *very* cautious. The white hunter's steps are traced, Nina says; and unless he heeds the warning he will step into a pitfall. Where did the lover go?"

"I know not; he left the cavern some time ago, promising to return before dusk; but he has not, you see."

The mournful eyes searched Pinto's face.

"Will the hunter's friend tell him what Nina says?"

"Of course; and were he only here now to hear it for himself, I'd be glad."

"Do not forget; Nina will come again."

Another hour of apprehensive anxiety, and then came the tardy Julian.

"Why, what could detain—"

Pepe suddenly stopped, staring in amazement at the hunter's face.

"St. Genevieve, what is the matter? Speak, tell me!"

Panting and excited, agitated and exhausted, Julian could only point to the woods below.

"Well, what? The Senorita Helene is safe, is she not? but we are in danger, for crazy Nina was just here and compelled me to promise I would repeat her message—that we were traced, or rather you were. But, Julian, I treated it as an idle alarm, yet your face, your agitation—can it be true?"

"Even so; and at this moment they are on the trail."

"And the only way to escape from this place is down the path by which you came, and that will lead us to them. What do you propose to do?"

"Nothing, but resist to the last," responded Julian, his eye gleaming ominously, and his voice low and thrilling.

"But," queried Pepe, anxious to catch at any straw, "are you sure of it?"

"Of what?"

"That they are on the trail; who told you?"

"My truest friend—one who has never yet failed to give me warning."

"I don't understand."

"The forest wanderer, poor crazed Nina."

"But, how does she learn everything?"

"Ah, that I know not, indeed; I often wonder. I can not solve the mystery, that, to me, always involves her."

"I suppose she is a sort of harmless lunatic, sufficiently cunning to elude danger, and equally alert in learning news."

"May be so. But, Pepe, let us waste no more time, but prepare for the defense. To attempt to leave would be madness. We have one advantage over our enemies, a knowledge of the grounds, which to them must be entirely strange."

Carefully examining their trusty rifles, and looking to the pistols in their belts, each grasped a knife, and silently awaited the coming of the enemy. A wild shout arrested their attention, and, glancing quickly up, they perceived the faces of half a dozen men half-way up the narrow path. The foremost one was scarce five yards from the spot occupied by the refugees; and, as his tall figure slowly advanced, they recognized the Indian, Tullona.

A fearful fire burned in his wild eye, the meaning of which Julian too well understood, for he was the friend of the Indian's hated enemy, Minoni, the noble warrior who now filled the fallen chieftain's place. This fact, simple as it was, caused Tullona's vile heart to swell with hatred; and the fact that the death of the noble hunter would grieve Minoni was sufficient reason for Tullona to risk much for his revenge; which reason, added to a natural love for such adventures, and the large reward offered, had secured to his employer, the no less revengeful Zarate, a willing tool for this nefarious enterprise. Behold him, then, the guide and leader of half a dozen soldiers sent by the colonel commandante, ostensibly to arrest and bring back the deserter, Pepe Pinto, and Julian St. John, as his aider and abettor, but really to capture, for private, personal reasons, the lover of Helene.

Julian saw that dull gleam in Tullona's eye and he knew its meaning. Compressing his lips still more tightly, he exclaimed:

"Back, or I fire! Not a man passes that spot." The hunter's voice was loud and his face determined.

Still the tall form of the Indian remained in the same position; his faded plumes nodding in the twilight, and the hand grasping a hatchet.

"Back!" again shouted Julian.

A second, and the sharp crack of his rifle resounded and reëchoed among the rocks; the helmet of feathers rolled down, and convulsively throwing up his arm, the Indian fell, with a dull, rushing sound, down the descent, striking the stagnant pool with a low, dull thud.

His comrades uttered a cry of terror, and those who had followed him to the top of the path, ran back, hiding behind the ledges.

"Save your bullets, Pepe; there are but two loads apiece, you know, and there are six yet to master."

"Tullona has gone to his long rest, Julian, thanks to your unerring aim. See, there is a head— Ah! he ducked before I could fire."

For a moment no one moved or spoke, besiegers or besieged; then a movement was visible among the soldiers. Cautiously changing their positions they gradually moved nearer together until the entire squad, six in number, were in quite a solid body. Julian and Pepe could not fire, as they dared not approach the ledge, thereby losing command of the defile, through which but half their number could have passed at once.

The hunter was eagerly scanning the hanging cliff of rocks; a sudden thought struck him.

"Heavens, Pepe, if these ragamuffins should discover that they can scale the shelves, we are lost! Don't you see? they are entirely hidden, and unperceived could easily climb to the top and burst in upon us, while the other three can enter by the path!"

Pinto's eyes scanned the cliff. It was even as Julian said; should they discover their advantage, to surrender would be the only alternative—or death.

"Let us hope for the best; but, Pepe, should I fall, and you escape, go to Helene and tell her all. If you are the victim, what shall I do? any thing you say. But if both—"

A wild yell interrupted him, and ere he was well aware of their intentions, the space in front of them was filled with soldiers!

Half had scaled the projecting rocks, and, skulking behind them, had waited till the remaining three crawled up the path, then, in concert, they jumped, yelling and shouting, upon the prisoners.

"Surrender, surrender!" yelled the sergeant, "and your lives are safe."

"Never, while a shot remains! Fire, Pepe!"

Two of them bit the dust, and both the rifles were raised again, when an expert blow knocked them aside, discharging their contents wide of the mark. Two strong arms felled Julian to the ground, and he was defenseless—a prisoner in the hands of his foes.

Vainly trying to rush to his comrade's aid, Pinto beat back the soldiers with his knife.

"Escape, escape, if you can," shouted Julian.

Snatching his unloaded rifle with one hand, and brandishing his knife in the other, Pepe leaped for the opening. A brawny arm intercepted him, and a violent grasp on the wrist detained him a second, but only a second. Wrenching his arm free by a mighty effort, he struck at the man with his knife, and plunging through the entrance, ran, shouting and yelling, down the dangerous pass, leaping from ledge to ledge, while the bullets of the enraged soldiers—the two who were not holding Julian down—whistled against the cliffs and rebounded down the rocky chasm.

CHAPTER XI.

AT LAST.

NEARLY two weeks have passed since the night of the attempted, but fortunately unsuccessful abduction of Helene Valencie; a fortnight since the mysterious "Ebon Mask" had caused such a strange disturbance in the commandante's mind; two weeks of planning and plotting, of scheming and devising.

Stratagem upon stratagem had been concocted only to be rejected, and Zarate was at length compelled to renounce as hopeless the possession of the treasure he so coveted.

"But it is only for the present, mind you, De Leon, that I thus desist. After a time, I shall try differently. Meanwhile, I do not intend being lazy."

"What's on the carpet now?" inquired his charmingly indifferent companion.

"'Who's on the grass' you'd better say; for I warrant he doesn't set foot upon carpet very often."

"Really, quite a play upon words, my dear Antonio; it would take one more obtuse than I not to at once perceive your meaning."

"A truce to joking, De Leon; I have good news to tell you; tidings that will surprise and delight you."

"What? Do be quick, for I am all impatience."

"De Leon, we've tracked our noble lover to his haunt, and even now a squad of men are on the trail."

"You don't say it! Surely, that is splendid news. But how, and why, and when, and where?"

"How, why, when, and where?" repeated Zarate, bewildered.

His companion laughed long and heartily.

"I don't wonder at your astonishment, really, for my question was ambiguous, not to say confounding. But, let me speak more plainly, and ask one question at a time. First, then, you say you learned his retreat—how was that accomplished?"

"Through the agency of Ricovi and Tullona, who, since their previous failure, have been unremitting in their efforts—thanks to their former mortification and my strong whisky."

"Good; now *when* shall you capture him? But, I forgot, probably he is in *durance* this moment. You say you sent a party out—when?"

"This noon; the cave where he hides is full two miles from here, and the men required time for a reconnoissance, you know. They were under the command of Tullona."

"I should judge it was time they were back: would not you?"

"Half-past eight; well, yes; but I shall not expect them till nine."

The two officers leaned lazily back, puffing their cigars.

"This *will* be quite a feather in your cap, Antonio—arresting the deserter and an *accomplice*, too."

De Leon's black eyes twinkled sarcastically.

"I understand, though; between you and I, I must confess the deserter's escape would affect me but little. But it's a cover—a good cover, you know, this vigilant searching after one of my soldiers; it looks just about right, too; and the people all agree with me in regarding the hunter as criminal in aiding a soldier to escape from his majesty's service, as said soldier is culpable in deserting from the army."

Again a short pause, disturbed only by the puffing of the fragrant cigars.

"Zarate, do you recollect the last time we sat here together, waiting the return of Tullona and Ricovi with the lovely Helene?"

"Remember, eh? I guess my memory is capable of recalling so recent an event. Perdition, but that was a confounded failure."

"Just so, and I couldn't help wondering whether this expedition would prove as futile."

"Never, by my mother, or I'll shoot every man I sent!"

"Nonsense, colonel; of course it wouldn't be *their* fault, for I'll warrant if he is there, they will bring him. I only thought, what if he *isn't* there?"

"I don't apprehend a failure at all, and, to tell the truth, I am too desirous of securing him to allow myself to think of such a result. If I can't have the lady, I am determined to punish her by securing the lover."

"Can't have the lady, Antonio?"

"Well—that is—I hardly think I shall venture soon again; in fact, I rather guess I won't. Some few events have transpired rendering it a little inadvisable."

"So? Inform me, do."

Zarate hesitated a moment.

"Really, De Leon, I meant nothing; of course I can have the girl by resorting to unfair means; but, for the present, I prefer tormenting her a little by keeping the fool of a boy—that Julian—in one of our strongholds down there in the guard-house."

"Hark!" said De Leon, assuming a listening attitude.

A noise, as of the tread of many feet, was distinctly heard outside.

"It is they! and— Yes, by St. Genevieve, man, they have got *him*!"

The men gazed eagerly out of the window. Truly, there was the hunter, at last, securely bound, a captive in their midst, subject to the commandante's pleasure.

"Bring them up," he shouted to the sergeant.

A hurried movement, then their feet were heard on the stairs; the door opened and Julian

St. John and the Spanish officer stood face to face.

"And Pinto—where is he?" he demanded of the sergeant.

"Escaped, senior, and fled, I know not whither."

Zarate's eyes darkened, as if in displeasure.

"You may return to your quarters; you and your men."

Profound silence reigned in the room, unbroken even by the low murmur of the breeze. His feet fastened by a chain, and his arms tightly bound, Julian stood proudly defiant, his handsome face blazing with scorn.

Opposite him, in languid haughtiness, sat his captor, carelessly smoking, as if in utter contempt of his prisoner. A sarcastic smile shone over all his features as he addressed the hunter:

"Well, sir, I suppose you perceive you are in my power at last?"

"In your presence, Colonel Zarate, but in your power—NO!" replied Julian, fixing his eyes on the colonel's face.

The officer smiled, and pointed significantly to the chains.

"These matter little to me!" returned St. John. "And, bound and fettered though I be, I ask no favors of you or any one in your service. If you think to intimidate me with words, you are mistaken; for I scorn you and your power."

Julian's eyes flashed upon his rival.

"Peace, boy; remember who you are, and what I am; just—"

"Pray, what are you, but a contemptible specimen of depraved humanity?" burst forth from the hunter's lips, with all the impetuosity of his nature. "Who are you, indeed, that send your spies out after a lady, a pure-minded girl, that you may compel a love which you can not win? You, who—"

Fired with fearful rage, Zarate strode across the room, and with the flat of his sword struck Julian a blow, bringing his words abruptly to a close.

"Hold, Zarate! You are hasty—that is unkind," interposed De Leon, who had remained a silent spectator of the scene.

For a half-second Julian's self-control well-nigh deserted him; then, with a mighty effort, he calmed his rage. "Pitiful coward!" said he to the colonel. "I can forgive that blow of one who so far forgets his manhood as to strike a defenseless prisoner."

"You dare call me a coward, you dog of an American? But your pretended courage will be brought low; remember, Julian St. John, there are deep, dangerous and gloomy cells where such as you are confined."

"The heart of the hunter—the heart Helene holds—never yet pulsated with fear."

A spasm of rage crossed Zarate's countenance. "Proudly spoken, but it avails not. You are a prisoner."

Summoning a guard, Julian was led away; and the first dawn of morning's light found him securely fettered in a filthy cell in the guard-house, with the allowance of musty bread and unpalatable water standing all untouched and unnoticed, where it had been placed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAGED BIRD.

RAPIDLY as a young deer, lightly as the nimble-footed chamois leaps over its native hills, Pepe Pinto sprang from cliff to cliff, from ledge to ledge of that wild descent, stopping for naught but to yell back upon the ears of the soldiers his shout of defiance. Fast as the gathering darkness would allow, he sped along through the dark aisles of the forest, crashing, in his haste, among the tangled bushwood; now upon open ground, now over the marshy brook, then over the roadside. Here he slackened his speed somewhat, but only to rest a moment. Tightening the belt around his waist, and wiping the dripping perspiration from his heated face, he again put forth all his speed, hastening toward the village of Pensacola.

He had completed about half his journey, and was hurrying along beside the edge of a dense wood, when he was suddenly accosted by a woman arrayed in robes of midnight blackness. Her tones were polite and courteous, and her expressions refined and intelligent.

"Senior, may a stranger inquire your haste? Yet hardly a 'stranger'; for, if I mistake not, you are a friend of the lady Helene, and her friends I call not strangers, but brothers."

"Then, you can surely appreciate my haste; for I go to bear her bad tidings—sad news of her lover, the brave Julian, who is, this mo-

ment, a prisoner in the hands of Colonel Zarate's soldiers."

"A prisoner? impossible! Then I will not detain you longer; but bid her be of good cheer, for, under God's blessing, all shall be well."

She turned aside to let him pass. Respectfully raising the gloved hand to his lips, he bowed and again pursued his way.

A short time brought him to the end of his journey, and his message to Helene filled her heart with terror and grief.

"Oh, Pinto, you are sure they overpowered him? you are confident he did not escape?" she importuned.

"Positive, my lady. I saw him in the hands of his captors."

The tears fell upon Helene's fair cheek as she thought of his fate.

"Pepe," she said, vehemently, "*we must release him; it must be done.* Julian St. John shall not languish in the prison cell while I possess life and will."

"Gladly, lady fair, would I aid you, and even go alone to rescue him. Only tell me how."

Helene remained in perfect silence.

"On my way here," continued Pepe, "I raked my brain to devise some plausible mode of aiding in his escape, but I did not succeed. But I speak truly, signorina, when I assure you, if no other plan can avail, and my *substitution* in his place *will*, gladly, willingly, *joyfully* will I obtain his freedom."

"God bless you, Pinto, and make Julian and I more worthy of your disinterested friendship. May you never lack such a friend as you are to the poor hunted hunter!"

Helene caught his hand and bathed it in grateful tears.

"Pepe, I *must* go and intercede for him, who is dearer than life to me. Yes, I must, I will go, and if Colonel Zarate is human, he cannot refuse my prayers. I have decided; and ere tomorrow's sun goes down, I shall have presented my petition."

"My dear lady, do not! I implore you desist. Indeed, you risk your life—ay, pardon me, my dear lady, but you risk *more*! Colonel Zarate is a man of whom you know little; of whom I know much. Therefore, I beseech you, lady, by the love you bear Julian, by the regard you entertain for your unworthy friend, refrain from so rash an act."

The lady's face reddened as she listened and replied:

"Thanks, many, many thanks, dear Pepe. But I *must* go, my friend, trusting in God to protect me."

"Then, lady, I bid you adieu. My errand is accomplished, my message delivered. I shall return to the forest until I can learn what had best be done. Farewell, dear lady, and may Heaven's purest spirits attend and guard you."

Shouldering his heavy rifle, he left the lonely cottage in the orange bower, and returned to his lonesome haunts, in the silent depths of the woods.

Slowly and tediously passed the hours to the almost distracted girl, who, pacing her chamber floor, wept and prayed. The morning came, and with it rose the sun whose setting should witness the success or failure of her mission.

"'Tis true," she murmured to her own heart, as in the silent night-watches she had communed with herself, "'tis too true, I fear, that the commandante will deny my request; but, be that as it may, I shall go, and if ever mortal shall plead, it will be me. And I know the angels of innocence will guard me, and God grant to touch the captor's stony heart."

The morning hours sped by, and the midday sun shone high in the heavens, and completed half his downward course, ere Helene started to the colonel's presence.

It was about four o'clock of a most lovely afternoon; the air was warm and fragrant, laden with spicy sweets and scents of flowers. The beauteous bay in placid smoothness rippled softly on, and cooled the air with its moisture. On the shore bloomed the gorgeous southern flowers; snowy orange blossoms, mingling their delicious perfume with the ripening fruit whose golden globes gleamed among the deep, rich, green foliage, contrasting with the creamy buds, and resembling rare emeralds, and cool, glowing pearls floating in a sea of molten gold.

Through the sweet-breathed myrtle avenue, and tender grass cool and grateful to the tread, came Helene, all unmindful of the heavenly glory of that afternoon; only knowing, only caring that she went to plead for one dearer than life itself; one without whom the fairest beauties of linda Florida were as a desert place.

She reached the cottage on the bay shore, and

tremblingly entered the widely-opened door. Of a soldier lounging near she inquired for Colonel Zarate.

"He is here, signora, in his room. Be seated and I will tell him."

"Say that Senora Helene Valencie desires audience," she directed.

In a moment he returned.

"Please to follow me. The colonel is alone and will see you."

Almost apprehensively she followed, and was conducted to his—the villain's—presence. The soldier withdrew, carefully closing the door, leaving the two, purity and vileness, innocence and guilt, alone.

"Be firm!" she whispered to her heart, as she pressed her hand against it to still its wild throbbings.

The officer arose, well knowing the reason of her coming, but he determined to assume a bold demeanor, as though friendship's silken tie united them. Deferentially he advanced, and extending his hand with friendly *nonchalance* said:

"Truly, fair lady, I am signally honored. Can it be possible I see you here, or do my senses deceive me?"

Calmly and firmly she refused his offered hand, and then drew back, removing from her face her veil.

"Why, what does this mean?" he inquired, in a well-simulated tone of honest surprise.

"I wonder, sir, that my presence here at this particular time is not sufficient explanation," said Helene, with quiet dignity.

"True, by St. Genevieve," replied the commandante, with a sarcastic voice. "Truly, I had nearly forgotten, in my delight at seeing you, the *probable* reason why you thus honor me; had well-nigh forgotten that—"

"That Helene Valencie came to plead for one you hold captive—came to implore you by all you hold dear and sacred, to remove the awful weight of sorrow and agony pressing on my heart, while *he*, my loved one, is a captive and uncared for!"

She had advanced a step nearer to him, in her enthusiasm; her beautiful black eyes, brighter than the most lustrous ebony, were suffused with tears; the smooth, polished cheek first glowed, then paled with emotion; and Zarate, as he gazed upon the lovely features of the noble girl, felt the baleful flame warming in his heart and bubbling up in hot streams till his brain was turned; and, despite the warning of "Lecta, of the Ebon Mask," which, till now, he had under a vague fear regarded, he determined to possess this beautiful maiden.

"Oh, Helene, my beautiful bird!" was his only response to her petition, as he reached out his arm, his handsome eyes subdued and tender, dreamy in the passion that filled them.

With a low, frightened cry she sprung back, and an awful chill curdled her heart.

"I might have known, oh, I might have known! Heaven preserve me!"

She did not speak, only thought it, and stood with veiled eyes, apart from the man.

"Helene, Helene, my only love, listen. When I spoke those bitter words that night I discovered my servant at your cottage, I was mad, crazed, to have used such words to you, my fragile beauty. But, oh, oh, Helene, lovely daughter of Spain, you do not, can not, understand the great, the mighty love I bear for you. Oh, lady, angel star, I would not hurt one beautiful curl of your shapely head: I would be calm, respectful; but can you behold my passionate love, and feel no returning, responsive affection?"

She remained perfectly quiet a moment, then suddenly broke forth:

"And when I plead for one whom I love, even as you profess to regard me, will you turn a deaf ear to my entreaties?"

"But it is because I love you, *adore* you, Helene, and cannot, *will* not suffer myself to think of you as another's. Oh, answer me, lady, if I were in *his* place, would you thus plead for me?"

"Ah, then," returned she quickly, "you admit he is here, which you pretended not to know!"

He bit his lip in provoked silence, and paused a moment to reflect upon the answer. Then he renewed his importunate entreaties, until, tired and disgusted, Helene replied:

"Your conduct and language, Colonel Zarate, are distasteful to me, and I command you to desist. I do not love you, which you well know; and, sooner than marry one who can do as you are doing and have done, I'd thrust my hand in the fire till it should consume to ashes!"—in a tone of unflinching firmness.

That reply aroused the latent devil in the

Spaniard's soul, and in a paralysis of furious rage, he stood, powerless to move, glaring upon her with all the fiendishness of a demon.

"Very well, girl; and just in proportion as you despise my love, you shall feel my power!"

She shuddered, but firmly replied, in a low, undisturbed voice:

"Sir, I can pity you, who threaten a woman. But let me assure you that, even as I despise your love, do I defy your power."

"Do you pretend to abuse my authority—me?"

"As the commander of the post you certainly are in possession, and, perhaps, further. But I do, most emphatically, deny your authority in daring to coerce me in any possible way; and I doubt, also, the expediency of your detaining your prisoner—Julian St. John, upon grounds you know are false!"

There was a gleam in her eye, but she seemed unmoved.

"Again, sir, I demand—will you release him?"

"Never, unless—"

"What?" she eagerly inquired.

"You promise to become my wife."

Her face grew ashen pale, while he continued:

"Consent, and he is free within the hour; refuse, and you leave not this house till you are my wife. We will see what force can do."

Helene drew her slight form proudly up, and regarded him with a look of ineffable scorn.

"Sir, I know not what you intend to do, nor what you expect of me; but *this I do know*, and can say, that you, nor any mortal on this earth can compel me to be your wife! Sooner than that, I would die!"

"Indeed!" and advancing a step he reached forth to catch her. But he had miscalculated his distance; she had waited for this, and stooping, like a spirit she glided under his arm, unlatched the door and noiselessly and rapidly glided out of the house.

For a single second Zarate stood, a statue of thwarted passion and rage. His face was livid, his eyes wild, and he reached idly out as if clutching after her. For a second he stood, speechless, silent; then, as the slight form glided past the window, volition returned and his fertile brain commenced plotting.

"Ho, there, boy, send Ricovi hither instantly. Instantly, d'ye hear?" he shouted to some one underneath the window; and, ere the command had left his lips, Ricovi stood before him.

"There, d'ye see that girl, Helene Valencie, just entering the myrtle avenue? Well, follow her, and when she reaches the furthest part, overpower her and bring her back to me. Come in the back way and avoid disturbance. Take a trusty comrade, and make no delay, for the sun is down and the road lonely for a distance. Hasten, and you shall be well rewarded."

Chafing like a caged tiger, he dispatched Ricovi, and watched him and a companion enter the avenue. Leaving him to his not over-agreeable thoughts, we return to Helene.

"Safe, safe, thank God, but what a risk!" murmured the trembling girl, as she emerged from the inclosure surrounding the commandante's cottage. She drew her veil over her face, and walked quietly on, until she entered the fragrant myrtle path. The calm beauty of the early twilight, unnoticed before, filled her soul with a sweet, refreshing sense of its quiet coolness, and she went leisurely on, living over again the exciting scenes of the afternoon.

"No, Julian, Julian, my beloved! I have done what I could, but it was of no avail! In answer to my plea, I received an insult, and when I eagerly demanded the only price of your freedom, my loved one, 'twas an alternative you would indignantly have rejected. *His wife!* Oh, heavens, what a destiny!"

"But, despair not; other means shall yet be tried and other plans devised which may be successful. Until then, oh, heart, be calm and trusting."

Thus the sweet girl communed with her own thoughts as she pursued her way toward her home.

"Bird of the Forest, it has been long since Nina gazed upon your fair face, and listened to your musical tones."

It was the crazy Nina who suddenly appeared in her path.

"From whence come you, Nina?" Helene inquired.

"From the forest where the sun has shone brightly in poor Nina's hut ever since the day she felt the sweet lips of the Singing Bird pressed to hers."

Nina looked significantly at Helene, her large, mournful black eyes filled with unutterable love.

"Helene's heart is light if she brightened a sister's home."

"Yes, the hut in the forest is beautiful now, for it is lighted by the kiss of a pure maiden, and the dark woods seem less lonely when Nina wanders through, because in her heart, like twin angels bearing her company, are the remembrance of a fond caress and loving words."

The gentle girl blushed.

"Nina's words make me happy, and—"

"Hark!" interrupted the woman.

The two bent listeningly.

"I hear nothing; what is it?" resumed Helene.

"Footsteps; hist," returned her companion.

Helene screamed loudly, for a heavy hand was laid on her shoulder; she turned toward Nina, but she was gone, and Helene was alone with the ruffians. Screams fell from her pallid lips, as she vainly endeavored to free herself from Ricovi's grasp; but that rude hold was strong as iron, and she was an infant in strength under it.

"What do you want? Oh, let me go!"

"No; mus' go with 'Covey back to cottage. Come, not far."

"Oh, no, no, I can not. Let go, you hurt my shoulder."

"Be keeferful, man; you know what the kurnel sed, not to be overly rough."

It was a harsh voice that interposed, but there was humanity in its tones; at least Helene imagined so, and she turned to him.

"Oh, sir, what does it all mean? Why am I detained? Let me go, I implore, I beg! Do not be so cruel; it can do you no good."

"Dun'no nothin' 'bout it, gal; only we must obey orders. Be stiddy and come along quiet-like, or mebbe 'twon't be so pleasant."

Helene's heart sunk within her, for she felt another hand tighten on the fair arm, and she was a close prisoner.

"May God preserve me!" she prayed.

More dead than alive, so overcome was she from terror and apprehensive fear, the men found it no difficult task to bring her, unobserved, to the presence of her tormentor.

Weak, faint and trembling she stood before him.

"Ah, Signorina Helene, I see you have returned to reconsider that too hasty decision," was his greeting.

"Silence, sir, I command you! The mask is off, and I see you now even more plainly than before, the villain that you are."

"Rail on, fair beauty," replied Zarate, contemptuously; "but know that the time has come when I shall no longer use honeyed words or sweet pleadings; but, you in turn are at my feet—are my suppliant. You will sue for mercy, but in vain. Even as you spurned me, will I reject you; but, something worse than contempt is your destiny. Mark you, lady fair, your fate is decided. You love a man—no, not a man—a fool, a coward, whom I despise, hate; and if only to torment *him*, you shall suffer!"

"Corporal, remove this woman; she is an enemy to the Spanish government. Place her in the lowest dungeon, and see that you have an efficient guard to be relieved every two hours till midnight, when you may call me."

Helene had fainted, and was carried, all unconscious, to the place of confinement. Under the same roof with her lover, both secure in his hands, what wonder that the villainous countenance of Colonel Zarate expressed what his black soul felt, fiendish satisfaction?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERIOUS VISITANT.

WHEN Nina thus suddenly, and apparently in cowardice, left her terrified companion with the two ruffians, it was with an eye to Helene's own ultimate safety. With a natural shrewdness she suspected the object of the men's presence, and well knowing the unfortunate girl would need assistance—also remembering the grief and apprehension her mother would experience—determined to aid Helene as best lay in her power, and that was to apprise Senora Valencie, and if possible procure assistance.

She found the matron in her cottage, anxiously awaiting the return of Helene, who had gone on her errand to Zarate in opposition to her desire. True, her mother had not absolutely forbidden her going, yet she strongly objected to it; leaving, however, Helene to use her own discretion.

"Ah, [I might have known it! Fool that I

was to permit her to go!" she said, bitterly, when Nina told her.

Further conversation passed between them, and then the forest-wanderer left the home of Helene and plunged again into the dark woods, gloomy with the night shades.

Down in a dismal cell, which looked all the more ghostly from the faint rays of a candle, whose beams sought in vain to penetrate the furthest corners, upon a rude couch of straw covered with a soldier's blanket, lay the exhausted form of a lady, fair and lovely. Her long, curling tresses, unconfined by comb or cord, fell in luxuriant abundance over her white neck and arms; the eyes, dim and swelled with weeping, were fixed upon the floor, and the long lashes swept upon the cheeks pallid as the newly-fallen snow in our cold Northland.

Bowed with anguish, filled with indefinable terror, Helene Valencie looked the picture of beautiful despair, as alone at that midnight hour she held communion with her soul. From the death-like trance into which she had fallen upon being carried to Colonel Zarate's presence, she had recovered only to find herself in that awful place.

Consciousness gradually returned, bringing with it full possession of her faculties. She remembered the threats made by the commandante, that she should be his wife; and even in that lonely spot, the burning blush rushed to her cheeks as she dwelt upon it.

"So help me Heaven, I will be true to Julian, my first, my only love; and sooner than unite my destiny with that man I will perish here, inch by inch, amid the dirt and horrible loneliness."

A shudder quivered over her frame, but in her eyes gleamed the high, holy resolve, the firm, unwavering determination.

The hours passed slowly on to the captive, and the midnight bell had ceased ringing, its low echoes reverberating through the dark night, and still Helene sat, sleepless and watchful. As she gazed upon the long, flickering flame of the solitary candle whose untrimmed wick, which had burnt since it was carelessly set there, together with the scanty allowance of fare, seeing naught, but suffering, oh! so much, she imagined she heard the heavy wooden door creak on its hinges. She turned quickly, and a low scream escaped her lips, as she saw, standing within her cell, a figure arrayed in robes of midnight hue.

A long, gracefully adjusted veil completely covered the head, face and body, defying recognition. The heavy folds of the thick black dress swept voluminously around the form, and lay upon the damp floor at her feet. Under ordinary circumstances, this sorrowfully-arrayed person would have passed unnoticed along the public streets, for her toilet was that of a mourner; her whole manner denoting extreme grief, nothing mysterious or weird about it. But, at this peculiar time, under the particular circumstances, and when it seemed utterly impossible that any one could gain admittance, the black-robed lady's sudden appearance startled Helene, who, as she uttered the frightened cry, sprung to her feet.

"Fear not, my child. I seek not to harm you, but, if possible, to prove myself a friend."

The sweet, gentle tone reassured the trembling prisoner.

"Oh, dear lady, whoever you are, save me; for the love of Heaven, aid me in flying from this fearful place."

"No such urging is necessary, my poor caged dove; you are in trouble, and my heart aches when I think of what you are undergoing. But, be of good cheer, my child; be comforted, and, under Heaven's blessing, you will be [free, free as air ere many hours."

"Oh, take me now! Let me go away now, instantly, from this damp, lonesome place. Mysterious stranger, do not refuse my prayers!"

Helene clasped her hands imploringly.

"Not now, or even to night, can you leave your captivity behind you. It would be inexpedient, yes, impracticable, were Antonio Zarate to find his lovely bird flown when he pays his first visit."

The shiver that greeted her last words did not escape her eyes.

"Fear not, Helene—you see I know your name—when he comes. Depend upon my word that no harm can or will come to you; and, pardon me for suggesting, but an humble demeanor, one in which you must necessarily disguise your feelings even at the expense of personal pride, would be the surest to blind him as to your real motives, thus rendering him less suspicious, and our intended escape more certain and safe."

"It shall be as you say, for, oh, unknown lady, I am trusting you infinitely. Every word you say I believe as though it fell from my mother's lips. Do not disappoint me, and the warm love of a true heart shall ever reward you. 'Escape!' Sweet sound! God grant success."

"Leota of the Ebon Mask' never fails to fulfill a promise, and ere two more suns shall rise, you will be far from these prison walls."

Helene gazed in wonderment upon her midnight visitor.

"Leota—is it possible I see her of whom I so often have heard? One whom people look upon as almost supernatural, so mysterious are her comings and goings, so silent and oftentimes unexplainable her appearances."

Leota laughed. It was like a low, rippling wave of melody.

"And do the villagers regard me with so much awe? Really and truly, though, I do not much wonder at it, for my business leads me in strange places, and at peculiar times. However, Helene, I can assure you I am no spirit, no uneasy ghost unable to rest quietly in my grave, but a mortal, of genuine flesh and blood, quite as human as yourself. See!"

She drew off the black glove and disclosed a pretty hand, small and dark-hued. Helene extended her own and the two met, both warm and clinging; and as the fingers closed over each other, in a sympathetic embrace, a feeling, strangely akin to that which filled her soul on the day when she lay on poor Nina's bosom, swept over Helene's entire being, and she impulsively pressed the delicate hand to her lips. Resolutely she controlled her emotion and again addressed Leota.

"But, dear lady, you are a mystery to me. Who are you, and from whence did you come, and why that mournful garb?" she eagerly questioned.

Leota drew her glove on again, and replied, in a strangely sad tone:

"Who I am no one knows, at least in Pensacola, save one; people call me 'The Ebon Mask' because I ever wear these sad-colored garments, and habitually veil my face. For long years, Helene, no human being, save one, has looked upon my features; the mysterious veil repulses all curious glances."

"But, why?" persisted Helene.

"I can not tell you that, except that I am a mystery and shall remain so until my task, my self-appointed life-work is accomplished; never does this mask arise and disclose the face beneath until my vow is completed. Not until I unmask another before the world, a despicable villain, do I show who or what I am."

Her earnest language filled Helene with admiration, not, however, unmingled with awe and a desire to learn further.

"You called me by my name, Leota; will you tell me how you knew it, and why you came to aid me to escape from his power?"

"I know you, my child, and have known you for many years; and, ever interested in the good, the pure and innocent, I came."

"But how you came is a deeper mystery still, for a sentinel guards the door, and it is securely fastened by a massive lock and keys."

"Leota smiled, and held before her astonished gaze the key of the dungeon."

Helene trembled.

"Strange creature! I shall shortly fear you even as I now am mystified. The key, how did you obtain it?"

"Easily enough, doubting maiden; just as I intend returning it when I leave you, which must be now, for the morning dawn will soon be upon us, and were I discovered here, our plans would prove futile. I will tell you when I see you again; but I had quite forgotten something."

She drew from her dress a small parcel, containing food for Helene—oranges, figs and grapes.

Laying her hands on the maiden's head for a second, she turned away. Helene watched her slowly swing back the ponderous door, fit the key in its place, and then the door closed, leaving the captive alone in the place rendered doubly gloomy by the late mysterious presence. She heard the click of the lock, and the grating noise as the key was withdrawn; she listened as the bolt, an additional security, was shot into its place. The faint echo of light footsteps, rapidly gliding away, grew fainter and fainter; then solemn stillness reigned.

Somewhat encouraged, Helene allowed herself to fall into a light slumber, from which she did not awaken until almost noon, judging from the few straggling rays of light that crept in through the thin rift in the dungeon

wall, which served to light and ventilate the place.

"If I were only a man, how easily I could get out of this dungeon; but Zarate well knew when he put me here, how feeble is woman's strength. Oh, that my brave Julian were only in this room, so he might recover his freedom. Gladly would I exchange places with him, even though he be loaded with cruel chains. Oh, dearest Julian, you little know your own Helene is under the same roof as yourself, and a prisoner, too; confined for pleading in your behalf! But, courage, courage! for, when I am free, I will make another effort to release you!"

Her soliloquy was rudely disturbed by the turning of the key, and in an instant the door opened, admitting the hated person of her persecutor, the commandante. He advanced to the bench on which she was sitting, while she recoiled in horror. But she remembered the advice of her midnight visitor, and nerved by the thought of escape, and eventually obtaining Julian's release, by a mighty effort she disguised her emotions, and, to the eyes of her admiring jailer, appeared more the subdued, conquered maiden, than the loathing, terrified girl she was. Much—every thing, depended upon her demeanor, and well did she play her part.

"I hope the lady rested well last night, although the accommodations are hardly what she is accustomed to."

"As well, senor, as could be expected."

"But you look pale and careworn," he observed, with a searching glance.

"Is there not sufficient reason for that, senor?" she replied, averting her head.

"True, true, fair lady, and I assure you it causes me intense pain to be compelled to use that same reason in order to convince you of my truth."

"Truth, senor?"

"Ay, that I passionately love you, and desire it returned."

He bent close to her; her delicate cheek flushed painfully an instant, then the warm tint receded, leaving her pale and wan. She made no reply, and he continued:

"Signorina Helene, you are hard with me, and misunderstanding, as you do, my motives, it could scarcely be otherwise. Fair one, you know not the grief in my heart when I see you here, my prisoner, when I fain would grovel at your feet, a very slave. And yet, who is to censure? Ah, Helene, the door flies open at your command; speak but the word, and, as my promised wife, you walk forth a queen, a sovereign."

"I can truly appreciate your condescension, senor, but it is not for the high, noble commandante, the gracious king's own messenger, to stoop to wed a poor, untitled maiden. Oh, no, no! for there are many high-born ladies who would be meet to become of the knightly house of Zarate."

Was there covert scorn in that remark? His piercing eyes could discover no traces of it in the cast-down, saddened face, lovelier in its sorrow than ever before.

"Not so; and the name of Zarate would be honored by a Valencia assuming it."

"Ah, senor, spare me, and seek not to cast reproach upon my humble name. Do not press me, my lord, for I am unable to give you the required answer."

"Perhaps, now, you are unable, but I do not despair of it eventually."

"Let me undeceive you, then, and tell you my heart is another's, and my vow has been irrevocably given to him. Consequently you perceive the impossibility of consummating a union with one beneath you."

She said this quietly, carelessly, almost deferentially.

"Good," thought he, to himself; "this imprisoning business is just the thing. I knew it would take the starch out of her, and here, after one night's confinement, she is materially subdued—quite different from the impudent young termagant I thrust in here but yesterday. Another night, and I'll warrant she'll submit to any thing. I won't press her this time, but come again to-morrow."

Thus thought Zarate, as he gazed upon the pale flower so crushed and drooping through his cruelty; and to his credit be it said—for it is the only good thing we are able to chronicle to his memory—a pang of remorse shot through his heart at the thought of his tormenting wickedness; but ere the thought was full-born, it died, and his heart grew callous again.

"I leave you, fair lady, to meditate upon my offer; till this time to-morrow I give you to consider and decide. Then I will come. *Buenos dias, signorina!*"

He was barely through the door when Helene fell upon her knees, the fast-gushing, grateful tears flowing down her cheeks.

"Thank God! thank God, it is over! I shall not see him again, for to-morrow, when he comes, I shall be far away!"

The hours of that beautiful day passed unheeded by; the setting sun went down upon its royal couch of purple clouds, curtained by the azure waves of the bay; the stars came out one by one, and went trooping across the heavens. Some of them had but just reached the zenith, and the late evening wind swept refreshingly among the leafy trees, when a slight figure glided through the doorway of the dwelling on the bay-shore, and up to the room occupied by the commandante. A dim light was burning feebly, scarce shedding any beam upon the corners of the room. Upon a low settee, wrapped in a light covering, and but partly divested of his uniform, lay in sound sleep, his handsome features turned from the intruder, Colonel Zarate. His profuse curls were brushed from his forehead, still fair and smooth, despite forty years of dissipation; the heavy mustache did not conceal the smile that played upon his lips; and as he lay there, all unconscious of the presence bending over him, a tear fell on his upturned face—a pearly tear, from the eye of the mysterious intruder.

Noiselessly turning away, she—his midnight guest—advanced to a small table, upon which stood a square tin box; she tried it, but found it locked. With a sad smile upon her face, she went to Zarate's coat, which lay carelessly over a chair, and without delay produced a tiny key, which she fitted to the lock. A moment, and the lid opened, exposing naught but papers. Nothing daunted, she pushed them aside, and touching an invisible spring under the lock on the inside, drew the bottom of the box out.

Under the false bottom were two drawers, the key of which was the same that unlocked the box. She opened one, and found it empty; she unfastened the other. That drawer contained the object for which she was searching. It was a key, rusty and heavy.

She placed it in her bosom, re-closed and re-locked the secret drawer, slid the false bottom to its place, and secured it by the spring. Carefully placing the papers as she found them, she fastened the lid, and returned the key to its former place.

All this time Zarate had slept quietly and undisturbed, all unconscious of the tear on his face, or of the silent presence. And now, her object accomplished, the lady again advanced to his side and gazed earnestly upon him. Her lips moved, but no sound escaped them; and her eyes seemed suffused with tears.

"Oh! Antonio—Antonio! how is your soul steeped in crime, blackened and seared almost past forgiveness. And yet, no! For she whom you most wronged has forgiven, and she will guard your innocent victim. Not for your sake, Antonio, will Helene be guarded, but for her own; she who little knows you, little knows the fearful accursedness of your love for her!"

He turned in his sleep and in moving awoke. The lady drew back and slowly retired, pointing at her heart as she did so.

He rubbed his eyes and gazed after her.

"Confound that she-devil! What did she want here, prowling around in her death-robes? 'Leota of the Ebon Mask,' she calls herself. Well, if I don't unmask her it will be strange!" and he settled himself to sleep again.

Down through the lower halls glided the nocturnal wanderer, to a dark, damp cellar, where were the cells of the prisoners. Up and down the ghostly corridor, lighted by the struggling rays of a meager light, trod the guard, a grim, sleepy-looking fellow. Up to his side glided the lady, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Jose, will you let me see your prisoner for a few moments? Your master has let me have the key and I am at liberty to enter provided the sentinel offered no objection, which of course he would not be so ungallant as to do, particularly as I have brought a little gift."

She smiled and held out a generous flask of liquor. Jose eyed her suspiciously.

"It's all very well, ma'am, but I must say it looks queer."

"Why, Jose, how you talk! Surely you know me, Jose?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, I think I do. Ain't you the woman nobody knows and everybody knows?"

She laughed, and looked serious instantly.

"But, my man, I must see Signorina Valencia, now. May I pass?"

He hesitated.

"Here is the key, Jose, taken, as I said before,

from your colonel. If he allows me to have the key, surely no soldier has a right to deny my authority. When he will permit me to enter, with your permission, of course, Jose, that is equal to a command. Besides, you can regale yourself with this until I return."

She stepped by, leaving the flask in his hand. Adjusting the key, and shooting back the bolt, she swung open the door and stood in the presence of Helene.

The maiden's cheeks were flushed with excitement.

"Then you are come! Oh, I am so thankful."

"Hush; the guard is just outside; be perfectly silent and in fifteen minutes you will be free."

"But how, tell me how, Leota, will we pass him?"

"I gave him rum; that rum is drugged, and no person can counteract its effects for many hours."

She peered cautiously out. Upon the floor, with the partly emptied bottle beside him, lay Jose, already overpowered by the potent drug.

"Come, we can go now," and supporting the trembling girl, Leota stepped past the unconscious guard, through the musty hall, up the stairs and out the door.

Helene was free, free as the air she breathed!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

WHEN Julian St. John was rudely flung upon the floor of his prison, it would be almost impossible to describe his feelings. The cold, damp, filthy floor; the cruel chain about his limbs impeding the circulation, and rendering him faint and exhausted; the low ceiling, under which he could barely stand erect—these were the grievances, but minor ones; greater sorrows than personal discomforts absorbed all thoughts or care for self.

Helene! was she safe, and would Pepe keep his promise to guard her vigilantly?

Thoughts of her filled his soul with intensest anguish, and when he remembered Zarate's taunting words, the impetuous fire leaped to his eye and the indignant blood to his face.

"Villain, rascal, traitor! but if I ever get clear of this foul hole, the life of that miscreant will pay for it!"

But he grew calmer and more reasonable as day after day passed on. Helene had presented her petition to the cruel commandante, only to be insulted; Helene, the queen of Julian's affections, had been rudely caught and thrust into a dreary dungeon, and had passed tedious hours under the same roof that sheltered his head, and not twenty yards from his cell-door. And of all this the hunter was in profound ignorance; better it was so, perhaps.

It was the morning after Helene's escape that Julian stood by the narrow aperture, that served, in a style peculiar to itself, the double purpose of ventilator and window. The cool beauty of the day had no charm for him, and he gazed listlessly forth, scarce seeing, certainly not noticing, the clear blue of the clouds, or the gleaming foliage in its emerald freshness.

Suddenly a low whistle fell upon his ears. He started and listened. Again it came, low, very low, scarce more than a whispered echo. It sounded familiar, and a vague hope thrilled his heart as he allowed himself to think it might be a signal for him. Once more it came, and, urged by a strong impulse, he answered.

All was quiet for some time, when suddenly a tiny stick struck against the iron bars and fell just outside them. Quickly as he could free his chained feet, he reached and took it in. Around the twig was twined a slip of paper, and upon it written, in a chirography he knew was Pinto's:

"My brother, help is at hand. Be at the window to-night, just after dusk."

That was all it said, but it was enough, and patiently he awaited the appointed hour. Slowly sunk the sun, and then followed the lovely twilight, that delightful hour so fitting for repose and quiet, when it seems as though through the realms of space angels had passed, leaving behind an impress of their presence; that hour when the day seems reluctant to resign its scepter to night, yet lingeringly obeys.

The darker shades gathered, and, watchful and expectant, Julian stood at the window.

A low whisper startled him.

"Julian!"

"Here, Pepe, waiting for you."

"Hold up your hands, and take this."

A knife gleamed before his eyes.

"My hands are chained, and I cannot."

A silence followed this reply.

"If I could get your fetters off your arms, you would be all right. Think, Julian; can you not devise some plan?"

"Can't you slip it between the bars?"

"No; the hilt is much too thick. I will fix it; wait a second."

Probably half an hour elapsed ere Pepe returned with the blade.

"I saw the guard, so I was delayed longer than I expected. Now, your arms; reach them up, can't you?"

He could not, and Pepe threw the knife through. For a while he tried to snap his chain, but was unsuccessful.

"Here, Pepe, I will step on this roll of matting and straw; there, you can reach my wrists."

He bent his head, to avoid collision with the ceiling, and laid his hands against the bars.

Without a word, Pepe applied the keen-tempered saw, and in a moment Julian's arms were free.

"Now, your feet," commanded Pepe.

The chain that held them was, after considerable trouble, divided, and he could walk once more.

"The time to escape is not yet; you must use that knife whenever you have an opportunity. The walls here are nothing but wood and hardened clay, which will not long resist your knife. The next night but one from this I will come with horses, and you can fly. The guard is coming again, and I must hurry off."

Pepe was gone ere Julian could reply. He turned to his dismal cell again, and adjusted his chains about his limbs, to give any chance visitors the appearance of being bound firmly, yet allowing himself free motion.

Cautiously he began his task; patiently he tried various places in the wall, endeavoring to select the best. At last, about a yard from the window he concluded to begin his mining operations, so, listening to see if he could detect any sound, he went to work with no feeble arm. For a long time he continued his task, until heated and tired, he carefully removed all traces of his work, hid the knife, and sat down to recover from his fatigue.

"This being bound so long, and so tightly, too, makes me weaker than I would have thought," he murmured to himself, as he carefully arranged the fetters upon his legs and arms.

Left once more to his thoughts, they quickly reverted to Helene, who, even at that moment, was eagerly, anxiously awaiting the midnight hour when she would be freed from the prison walls.

The night slowly passed, and the morning dawned—dawned upon Julian in his lonely cell; upon the commandante, sleeping as Leota had left him; and upon the inmates of a lodge built in the most quiet recesses of the cypress grove. Gathered around a humble board, upon which was spread the frugal morning repast, were Senora Valencie, Helene, and the mysterious creature, Leota. Near the door stood Pepe Pinto.

"And to-night, Pepe, did you say he would come?"

"Perhaps to-night, signorina; may be not until to-morrow. I shall, if possible, visit the window again when dusk comes, and, if all is ready, I don't see why this midnight will not do as well as to-morrow's."

"Do bring him as soon as you can; and bring him here, Pepe, to Leota's hut; may he not?" asked Helene, turning to the lady.

"Most certainly I shall expect him; and then we can fly to a more secure retreat if necessary."

"It grieves me so, dear lady, that you should risk your personal safety for me," returned the maiden, looking sorrowfully at Leota.

"Say not so, my child; do you not remember the words I told you that night in your prison-cell? Remember them, but allow me to pursue my own course."

"Always and ever will I gladly and willingly obey you; and so long as I live will you be gratefully and lovingly remembered."

The impulsive, enthusiastic girl caught the hands of her deliverer in her own.

"There, there, child, you are foolish," but Helene saw a happy, fond light scintillate from the veiled eyes.

"Finish your breakfast, daughter, do!" interrupted her mother.

"I am done, thank you, mamma. But I wish to ask you a question which I had almost forgotten. I want to know where Nina is; do you know? Poor creature! I saw her last just as they—they took me."

Helene's eyes gleamed in excited re-

membrance. Her mother exchanged glances with Leota, and seeking to pacify her daughter, replied, carelessly:

"Somewhere in the woods, I suppose. I have not seen her since she told me of your seizure."

"Then it was she who conveyed the news? I might have guessed it. And did you leave the cottage immediately to come here?"

"The same night, daughter. Nina directed me to this spot, and here I found your generous deliverer, who insisted upon my remaining with her while she brought you to me."

"And the villagers; what do they say of our sudden flitting?"

"I know not, but I suppose nothing. They would very naturally suppose we had gone on a visit to our friends; no one except those interested know of your troubles."

While this side-play was being enacted in the cottage in the cypress grove, another of entirely different character was transacting not far distant.

Zarate and De Leon were the chief actors.

"And so your wooing speeds right auspiciously, colonel?" remarked his brother officer, with the almost indifferent air so peculiar to him.

"Auspicious, indeed, comrade; gentle, quiet and subdued! Ha! ha! I know how to bring her down a peg or so."

He rubbed his hands in glee.

"Gentle and quiet, you said, friend?"

"Remarkably; why, man, I wish you could have witnessed our interview yesterday—"

"So you had the impudence to visit her in her cell, eh? Ah, Zarate, I fear you are a bad fellow."

The colonel smiled, and complacently stroked his mustache, as though he enjoyed the compliment.

"You must not be hard on a fellow, *mon amigo*. Just as if it were possible to remain from such a dainty little piece of dimity. But, confidentially, De Leon, I was a little surprised at her demeanor, and my reception; so much so that I positively forgot my errand. However, I promised to see her again this afternoon, and then I'll lay an *onza* she is willing enough."

His companion puffed away at his cigar.

"Changed her tactics to throw you off your guard. Depend upon it, colonel, that the Signorina Helene is no less cunning than daring. She only assumes—"

"What mean you, De Leon?" interrupted the commandante, turning pale with surprise.

"If you will wait until I am through, possibly you may understand what I mean—that is, unless you are too intoxicated with your imaginary success to be rational, and listen to reason."

De Leon's voice was cool, and betrayed no disposition to hasten, although he noticed the impatient scowl on his companion's brow.

"Well, then, if you are at last ready, do pray condescend to impart this wonderful piece of information," sneered the colonel.

For a moment De Leon fixed his piercing eyes upon Zarate's face, and rising, threw his cigar out the window.

"Colonel Zarate, I am not accustomed to being addressed in that style, and, consequently, do not consider myself at all bound to reply to your insolent remark."

"Insolent remark, sir? Be careful, and remember whom you address," returned the commandante, now thoroughly enraged.

"I most certainly do recollect that I address one who would gladly call himself superior; but, it fortunately happens that Colonel Zarate ranks the same as Colonel De Leon."

"Tis a lie, and you know it! You know well that the commandante of the Spanish troops in Florida is the highest authority, the chief executive power."

"Sir, you have dared to call me a liar, you have used words no gentleman, no true Spaniard will receive from any one. It is past; it is beyond recall, and you will hear from me without fail. Good-morning, sir."

De Leon's lips were compressed and pale, and his eyes bright and flashing as he left the apartment.

He had just touched the latch when an orderly came excitedly in, and, barely stopping to salute, hurriedly exclaimed:

"Colonel, the prisoner has escaped!"

"WHAT?" demanded Zarate, with ashen lips.

"She has escaped, and—"

He raised his eyes toward the door. There stood De Leon, who had heard it all. A sarcastic smile played upon his lips, and a triumphant light gleamed in his eyes. For a moment he gave the enraged officer the full benefit of both, then withdrew, and passed down the stairs.

"Ten thousand curses on him!" growled the colonel, gnashing his teeth in impotent rage.

"Your prisoner has escaped?" he demanded abruptly of the soldier.

"Yes, sir; the woman, the spy."

"But how, man, how? Who was on guard? Send me the sergeant of the guard instantly. A thousand maledictions on his head who could not attend to his duty better; and may I die by inches if a hair of his head remains unhurt!"

He fairly foamed with rage, and it was by a superhuman effort that he received, listened to and gave orders to the sergeant who had just entered.

"Is the orderly's report true?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, and the key of the cell is in the door."

"*Per todos santos!* the key in the lock?" and with a cry he sprung to the small tin box on the stand. Quickly he unlocked the lid, threw aside the papers, touched the spring and moved back the bottom. There were the two drawers, both locked; applying the key, he instantly opened them. Horror of horrors! the key, which he had himself placed there, was gone!

With glaring eyes he surveyed the box, and faint sounds issued from his lips.

"The hidden spring—the false bottom—who knows that secret but myself? I, who made the box? Not a mortal could find the key unless they knew the secret!"

But, there was the box, and there was not the key.

"Bring me the key, sergeant, immediately."

"I have it with me, sir."

He handed it to his superior, who took it with a sort of mysterious awe, as if fearing it might escape from his grasp. It was the selfsame, veritable rusty old iron he had secured in his most private stronghold, not ten hours before. As he gazed upon it, there came to his mind, like a flash of lightning, blinding and scathing, the recollection of his mysterious visitor on the previous night, and a cold sweat stood on his brow.

"*Madre de dios!* it was she, the black mask!" and unmindful of the presence of the men, he sunk upon a seat, covering his face with his hands.

Strange thoughts passed through his mind while he sat there, and he remembered her first vague warning.

"But the secrets of that box: could she, fiend though I believe her, thus secure the key to a prisoner's cell? And the guard—how pass the guard?"

This train of thought suddenly aroused him.

"Sergeant, who was on duty last night when the woman made her escape?"

"Private Jose Escobedo, sir," and he pointed to a man by his side, who cringingly saluted.

"Well, and what report have you to make?" sternly asked the colonel.

In a plain straightforward manner Jose related the events just as they transpired, so far as his knowledge went, which, of course, was limited, as after the door had closed on the Ebon Mask, all further consciousness on his part ceased, for he had not been slow in partaking of the rum.

"A likely story. Had you not better confess your complicity in this affair and admit you were bribed?"

"So help me God, I have told the honest truth," ejaculated the man, in abject terror.

"Bah! Sergeant take him away and confine him in a secure place, and fasten a fifty pound ball and chain to his feet, and allow only half an allowance of prisoner's rations. My honest Jose, we will comfort you with a court-martial some of these days."

The two left the room.

"Sergeant, come back when you have obeyed my orders; meantime dispatch the boy Luez for Ricovi, for I desire him immediately."

Twenty minutes later, and the rogue stood before him.

"You are sure you understand my directions, and will execute them correctly and speedily?"

"Yes, sure. Want me and my man, Lope, to find where pris'ner 'scaped to; then come back, git more men, and go fotch 'er, eh?"

"That is just it. Now be off, and hasten."

At that moment the sergeant returned.

"Well?" demanded the imperious colonel.

"You desired me to return, sir."

"Yes. Remove the lock from the other prisoner's cell, and bring it to me. See that there are massive iron bars put up, one in the center, and one at each end. Be careful, and assure yourself they are as strong as iron will make them. Also detail two of your trustiest men to stand guard until midnight."

Once more alone, Zarate's thoughts were none

of the pleasantest, and the heavy scowl on his brow was blacker than ever.

"Vexation! everything unpleasant seems to pour upon me now, just as good fortune favored me so lately. Not twenty-four hours ago I was gloating over the possession of the bird; now I can console myself with the empty cage. Then I called De Leon my friend, now he is my bitterest enemy. Fool, fool that I was, to alienate him, for he spoke truth when he affirmed that our ranks were equal; and had he said his influence with the ministry exceeded mine, commandante though I am, 'twould have been strictly true. But now, now I fear I must dearly pay for my rashness. However, De Leon shall never know it, even though I am recalled and cashiered—and he has influence to do even that!"

His reverie was cut short by a low knock at the door.

"Come in," was the moody response.

A boy, evidently a stranger, entered.

"Are you the commandante?" he inquired.

Zarate nodded, and the boy handed him a slip of paper.

"The warning was unheeded; be prepared for the consequences. Sooner than you anticipate, the vial of wrath will be poured blighting upon you. Remember. LEOTA."

This was all the note said, but it was enough to cause a sickening sensation to creep over the man's heart, and a faint vague terror to fill his soul. Was it a premonition? was it the shadow already falling over him, the awful shadow of the almost accomplished vow of "Leota, of the Ebon Mask?" We shall see.

CHAPTER XV.

THE REUNION.

Two persons sit conversing on a rude bench just outside the guard-house.

"I sincerely hope you will pardon me for the disagreeable duty I am about to perform. You know, colonel, such things will happen, and must be satisfactorily accounted for. My friend, De Leon, recognizing you as an equal in the service, feels that he can require satisfaction, or an ample apology."

"And am I, then, expected to retract the words I uttered?" demanded Zarate, haughtily.

"Or else accept the alternative," I believe.

"Very well," replied he, coolly. "Tell him whom you represent that I do not intend retracting anything I said, and do not anticipate making the slightest apology. I accept his challenge, as a soldier—as a gentleman."

He bowed stiffly, and received a similar salute in return.

"As the challenged party, you, of course, have the choice of weapons, sir."

"And I select rifles, sir."

De Leon's second eyed him in astonishment. "My dear sir, I beg you will not think of it. Rifles! They are only fit for huntsmen and robbers. Swords!—certainly swords—such elegant toys for gentlemen of rank."

"Yes, and be cut to pieces without mercy," thought Zarate; then aloud he replied:

"I have named rifles, and shall abide by that decision."

Senor Rosales bowed.

"To-morrow morning, sunrise, one mile from Pensacola, on the bay-road. Any further information you will learn from Signor Jacinto, who will act in a friendly capacity toward me. *Buenos dios; hasta manana!*"

Not twenty yards from the spot where Zarate and Rosales were sitting, was the cell of the hunter, and, as he stood by the narrow aperture, with the cool air refreshing him in his feverish anxiety, the voices of the two men were borne to his ear, a confused murmur of inarticulate sounds.

Directly he saw a horseman dash through the gate, and he recognized him, in the gathering twilight shadow, as Ricovi. A gleam of awful import flashed across Julian's face; but his compressed lips gave forth no sound. Had the horseman seen and correctly read that glance, he would not have ridden with such alacrity to the door of the guard-house.

The colonel still sat there, and as he noted the approach of the horseman, he arose to meet him.

Not ten paces from Julian's window they met, and, although their voices were low and cautious, yet the night wind favored the prisoner, who strained every nerve to hear; for, with a strange prescience, he felt it concerned her.

"And you were successful, my good Ricovi. I read it in your face. Tell me, quick."

"Trailed 'em, kurnel; brung up at the old cabin in the cypress grove; see 'em in winder, mother and a 'oman in black with a veil over 'er."

The commandante trembled with excitement. "Did you see any men with Signora Valencia and her daughter?"

Frightfully gleamed a pair of dark eyes in the cell-window, and fingers clasped the bars convulsively.

"No men; git her easy 'nuff. Me and Lope, we kin do it. Go 'bout midnight, 'sprise 'em, carry her back here. 'Covey'll do it."

"See that you do; here is gold, and when you deliver the girl to me, you receive more. Be very cautious, Ricovi, for you remember you disappointed me once—the first—"

"Was that 'Covey's fault? Could he git her when she no come, eh?"

"You are right; it was *not* your fault. But it will be now, for you say yourself you saw her. When may I expect you back?"

The man studied a moment.

"Sunrise to-morrow."

"Ah, sunrise!" and a pang shot through his heart. "Sunrise," and what else do I meet then?" he thought.

"That is late; can't you come sooner?"

"Will try."

He rode off again, and Zarate returned to the doorway of the guard-house, little thinking upon whose ears the entire conversation had fallen.

A note was dispatched by him to his friend, Captain Jacinto, informing him of the liberty he had taken in appointing him "second" in the coming passage of arms; begging his pardon for the seeming freedom, yet gently hinting it was *la commandante* who thus favored Captain Jacinto, etc.

A speedy reply came by bearer, accepting the honor, and promising to see the colonel before the meeting, and thus it was arranged.

The midnight hour was cool and cloudy; a few straggling beams flitted over the face of nature, as the scudding clouds now obscured, now revealed, the crescent moon.

By the window stood Julian, anxiously awaiting the arrival of his good friend Pepe, who, since the hour he left the knife, had not been near the guard-house. The bell had rung twelve, still he came not. Ever and anon, Julian heard the heavy tread of the sentinel, as he neared him in his tiresome beat, and the challenge of the outside guard fell distinctly on his ears.

During the afternoon he had heard mysterious noises, grating, pounding and filing, and had wondered what it meant. Little knew he that it was intended the more securely to hold him; and that the extra sentinel on duty was for his particular benefit. But it availed little to either him or the colonel.

Suddenly a dark form appeared on the edge of the woods, which lay about a hundred yards from his window. Creeping stealthily along in its protecting shade, it gradually approached nearer and nearer the long, low step on which paced the sleepy guard. A moment after, and it was crouching under the shade of the spreading shrub.

"Now if the moon would only hide at the same time that guard is turned, I could clear that open space in half a second. As it is, I must wait. Poor Julian must be tired of watching. I wonder if he has the hole dug out enough, although, of course, he wouldn't dare break the outer wall until after dark to-night."

At that instant fortune, or rather Providence, favored the waiting deliverer. The guard was half-way down his beat, and just then a heavy, lowering cloud passed darkly over the moon's disk.

With a skillful leap Pepe alighted near the window at which Julian awaited him in burning, unrestrainable impatience, for since he had heard the vile plotters arrange their plan, the minutes had seemed years.

"Julian," was whispered from outside.

"Here, Pepe. For God's sake, let us hurry."

"Climb up and stand on the matting again."

As he stepped up, a light clanking noise was heard in his feet.

"Your fetters, Julian—you have forgotten to remove them."

"Hist! No; perhaps we may find use for them."

"What! Do you apprehend immediate discovery and re-arrest?" inquired Pepe anxiously.

"No, no. I will tell you when I am out. Your hand, Pepe—there; hold fast. I am nearly through."

In a second he emerged through the narrow aperture, scratched and bleeding, the small splinters of wood and flakes of crusted dirt adhering to his clothing. He paused a single sec-

ond, drawing in long, deep respirations of fresh air.

"Thanks to our kind Father, Pepe, that I can embrace you again."

A hurried but earnest clasp of the hand followed.

"Where are the horses? We have not a moment to spare. If you only knew the agony of suspense!"

"Agony," Julian, when you are free, and she—

"Hist! the sentinel is near. Crouch lower, there, a moment, and when he turns we will glide across the open lot to the pine tree, yonder."

"The horses are near there."

They watched their time, and in a second were safely mounted on the waiting animals. Cautiously they rode along, keeping in the dense shade of the roadside bushes, until they had left the scene of their escape nearly a mile behind them. Meantime their tongues had not been silent.

Suddenly Julian said:

"Where do you intend taking me? To the ruins?"

"Indeed, no; but to Helene and her mother, who await you in the cypress grove."

"Oh, Helene! Heaven guard her till we reach her. Pinto, her life depends on our exertions to-night!"

"What do you say?" inquired the astonished companion.

"I repeat, if we wish to save Helene from a fate worse than death, we will not spare our horses." And he hurriedly related the story.

"My God, and can it be? So soon on her track, when 'twas but three days since—"

Pepe suddenly paused, almost forgetting that Julian knew naught of his lady's imprisonment.

"Since what?" demanded he.

"You will swear eternal revenge on him, Julian; but listen, and I will tell it all."

Terribly calm and unnaturally composed, he heard the story; not a word escaped his lips; but even in the dark night gleamed the light in that eye.

"And now, lest she fall again into his hands, we will to the rescue, and Heaven grant we may not be too late."

With difficulty suppressing a wild yell of defiance and challenge, the hunter sprung forward, followed by his trusty friend.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BAFFLED FATE.

AFAR in the grove shone a light, now bright, now dim, as the waving branches revealed or obscured its glow.

"Almost there. Spur up, Pepe. Who knows but that, at this very moment, the villains are within?"

Again they dashed on, and in a few moments alighted close by the humble entrance to the hut. The door burst open; Helene sprung to Julian's arms, almost insensible from her great joy. A single glance had sufficed to show him all was, as yet, safe, and extending a hand to Senora Valencia, with the other arm he pressed his beauteous betrothed closer to his heart.

The scene was one of bliss and joy; language were feeble to portray the deep, overflowing happiness that filled each breast. But, it was of short duration.

Sounds of approaching footsteps, stealthy and indistinct, alarmed them, and Julian, tenderly removing Helene from his side, started suddenly to his feet.

"Your rifle and knife, Pepe—are they ready?"

An assenting nod satisfied him.

"Come, then, we must hide, and let them get fully within. Do not be alarmed, my darling, at whatever may happen. Trust to us, and you are safe."

They crept behind a partition that divided the room into two apartments. Hardly had they accomplished this when the door opened, and a face, hideous and contorted, was thrust partly in. A second, and two men, armed with ready weapons, stood inside the door, staring maliciously around.

With a scream, Helene rushed to her mother's arms.

"Oh, mother, mother, they are the men who took me that day!"

Clasping her protectingly, the lady confronted the intruders.

"What do you here, and whom do you desire?"

"There's w'at we's after," grinned Ricovi—

for the reader will readily perceive who the men were—"come 'long back home, eh?"

"Do you dare threaten us? Leave this cottage instantly, as you value your lives," sternly commanded the signora, her eyes blazing with indignation.

"Women can't skeer me, nohow!"

He advanced to Helene, and his companion turned to her mother.

"Hold there, or you are dead men!" yelled Julian at the instant, and rushing impetuously upon Ricovi, he leveled him senseless with a well-directed blow between the eyes, while Pepe, with equal precipitancy, had surprised the other rogue who stood against the wall, and held him by the point of his bayonet.

"A motion of your finger, even, and this runs you through," fiercely declared Pinto, pricking him slightly as he spoke.

A moment sufficed to bind the ruffian, hand and foot, with the fetters Julian had brought, and the bayonet placed under his chin, he was unable to move his head without suffering a pretty sharp prick.

Ricovi, too, being senseless, was easily secured, and laid under a table to wake to consciousness and captivity.

"And now, Julian, what remains to be done? These fellows are our prisoners, yet we dare not report to Colonel Zarate."

"True, for he would, without hesitation, transfer the bracelets to you and I."

"May I be permitted to advise?" inquired a sweet voice.

They all turned quickly in the direction from which the tones came.

A graceful, black-robed lady stood in the center of the apartment.

"Leota, dear lady, when did you return?" joyously queried Helene.

"And how gain access to this room, without our knowledge?" asked her mother.

"Oh, I am a mystery yet, you know, although I imagine any one could noiselessly enter the door when you were all so engaged with your company."

She pointed to the prisoners.

In astonishment Julian looked on.

"I beg your pardon, my friend, for neglecting to address you, but you see how utterly impossible it was. However, I warmly welcome you, uniting in the general joy your return occasions."

He respectfully bent over the extended hand.

"But, lady, remember I am in entire ignorance of your name; therefore can not address you as I should. Please accept my warmest thanks for your kind interest in the welfare of a stranger."

"Oh, no; you are no stranger, my boy; a long time have I watched over you and noted the growing friendship existing between Helene and yourself, which, under my blessing and Heaven's permission, has ripened into love."

"Bless you, dear lady, and may you be eternally rewarded for your disinterested kindness to an orphan boy, whose only friends save these lie sleeping side by side in the far North."

His voice was husky and tears stood in his eyes.

"Disinterested kindness, Julian? No, indeed, for I am anticipating an immense reward," smiled Leota, archly.

"Don't look so surprised, Julian," said Helene. "She means all she says, but you will not be able to comprehend her. 'Mysterious' she claims to be."

"My friends, 'tis almost day, and we all need rest. Let us part for a brief time, and seek repose. The prisoners will need our friends for guards; we will retire to our beds; the advice I intend will do as well a few hours hence. Buenas noches!"

The first gray streaks of dawn were visible in the east; the stars were gone, and the restless clouds of the night before had scurried off, leaving promise of a pleasant day. It yet wanted an hour of sunrise, but an impatient form might be seen pacing up and down before the officers' quarters at the block-house. Within all was silent; the officers were sleeping on their bamboo-settees, and the guards drowsily whiling away the unoccupied hours off duty.

Without the solitary figure, clad in bright, shining uniform, walked to and fro. His gaze was up the road in the direction of the cypress grove; a cloud of impatience, discouragement and fear shadowed his face, while from the haughty lips fell the oft-repeated expression:

"What can detain them?"

For the fortieth time, probably, he had ejaculated the same question, and at each repetition, his face grew darker and more apprehensive.

Sounds of footsteps startled him; eagerly he turned; an expression of impatience escaped him, for 'twas only a boy, and he surely thought 'twas Ricovi.

But the lad, instead of passing on, came up to him and handed him a note.

"An answer if you please, sir."

The frown deepened as he read:

"COLONEL ANTONIO ZARATE:

"By order of Colonel Aguerie De Leon I am commanded to request that you will meet him near the hut in the cypress grove at the appointed time, instead of the bay-road. Begging that you will not decline to thus favor him, I am happy to have the extreme honor to remain,

"With profound respect,

"Your obedient servant,

"MANUEL ROSALES,

"Captain, etc."

"The hut in the cypress grove!" By what strange fatality had that place been selected? Surely De Leon could not possibly know of it? Of course not: the idea was preposterous. He had doubtless selected the place as being more private, and, in case of anything more serious, the hut was conveniently near. Besides, supposing Helene were there now, and her mother too? Ricovi and his accomplice would soon be back with one or both in custody.

"Tell Captain Rosales, yes."

"Is that all I shall say?"

"That is all. Vaya!"

Just as the boy turned away, a carriage drove up to the door, and an elderly man sprung out.

"Ah, Jacinto, I am rejoiced to see you; punctual as usual. Come in, and regale yourself with chocolate."

The two officers entered the apartment, and were passing through, when an orderly in hot haste advanced to Zarate.

"Colonel, the prisoner, Julian the hunter, has escaped through a hole cut in the wall!"

"Escaped, orderly? You tell me he has escaped? Can it be possible after the extra precautions I took last night?"

"He went by the outside, I said, sir—dug a hole in the wall. His chains are gone, too."

"Detail fifty men and scour the woods, and bring him back, dead or alive."

That terrible baffled look was fearful to behold as it settled ashily over Zarate's face; a pale rage seemed to possess him, and his eyes were cold and stony, his voice shrill and unnatural as he addressed Jacinto:

"'Tis almost sunrise, signor, and the time is come. Let us go. And if Ricovi or the orderly returns with either of the *escapades*," he added, turning to his lieutenant, "have them secured until I return."

Donning his hat, and shouldering the heavy, awkward Spanish rifle, he and Jacinto and the post-surgeon, Dr. Viscarra, entered the carriage and rode to meet—what?

CHAPTER XVII.

A LIFTING OF THE VAIL.

"WHAT, awake and up so early? Surely you can not have had sufficient rest. Remember it was well on to the morning when we retired."

Helene turned her bright face to the questioner, Leota.

"Might I not ask the same of you? But I will confess I should have indulged in a little more sleep had not the movements of these men disturbed me," she replied, pointing to the captives.

Leota glanced at them, and an expression of satisfaction flitted across her face.

"Oh, Leota, who is that coming?" suddenly asked Helene, who had gone to the window to inhale the fresh morning air. "Do you think they can be emissaries of the commandante?" she asked, apprehensively.

"What if they are—are not we well protected?"

She glanced at the sleeping hunter and Pepe, who had watched their charge till day, then finding them perfectly quiet and secure, had indulged in a slight slumber.

"Yes, yes, but if they should prove hostile and overpower us!"

"Nonsense?" cheerfully laughed Leota; "to me their occupation is not hostile—to us."

Silently they watched the movements without. It was about fifty yards from the window that two men were busily employed pulling up bushes and clearing the ground for the space of a few rods. At that distance the features were indistinct, but that they wore officers' uniforms was evident, the glittering straps and buttons being sufficiently prominent to dispel any doubt on that score.

The men had desisted in their work, and seemed awaiting something or somebody. Suddenly the sound of carriage-wheels came crash-

ing through the bushes, then stopped. A moment elapsed, and three gentlemen entered the cleared space—one, tall, haughty and elegant, the others, less so in their appearance.

Some conversation ensued, and the watchers in the hut saw one, the handsomest gentleman in uniform, turn and gaze toward them.

Helene saw his features plainly, and her face was pallid with terror as she gasped:

"Zarate!"

Julian and Pepe sprung to their feet, but Leota's reassuring smile was sufficient to stay them, and gently removing Helene and placing her on the settee, she took the young men aside and communicated something to them—something which prevented any surprise when they joined Helene at the casement to watch the proceedings.

The parties had changed positions and their situation was suspiciously indicative of their intent.

"A duel, oh, a duel!" murmured Helene, pale and sick. "Indeed, I cannot witness it. See, see, the rifles are raised! Quick, let me go before they fire!"

She rushed from the window and gained the other room just as a loud report fell upon her ear, and a heavy fall was distinctly heard at the hut.

It was Zarate who fell, his right side pierced by the ball from De Leon's rifle. He had instantly fallen, exclaiming: "I'm shot; De Leon, you've killed me."

Jacinto, his second, and Dr. Viscarra rushed to his side. Rigid, and apparently lifeless, he lay upon the ground, yet damp with the morning dew.

"Remove his clothes, doctor. Is he dead?" asked Jacinto, bending over him and assisting to strip off his clothing. Viscarra carefully examined the wound.

"I fear the ball has penetrated some vital part; his pulse is nearly gone, and you can see that respiration is entirely suspended."

De Leon came forward and gazed earnestly upon his fallen enemy; his fine features were sad, and his voice, though betraying little emotion, was low and feeling.

"I almost regret this unfortunate termination of affairs. Yet it is better so. Better if he never returns to consciousness again than to learn his future if he recovers. Doctor Viscarra, he needs water—does he not?"

"It is his only chance, but where is there any?"

De Leon pointed to the hut, almost hidden by the trees. Carefully they lifted the wounded soldier and conveyed him to the hut.

"They are coming here; let me go," struggled the affrighted Helene, as she saw the slow, sad procession move toward the door. She was too late, however, for the party had opened the door.

"Come, we will leave the room together," and only too glad, Leota and the ladies vacated the apartment.

For a long time no signs of life were visible in Zarate; but vigorous bathing and strong stimulants at length seemed to resuscitate him.

He gasped for breath, then sighed deeply, seemingly sensible of his condition. Later his energies seemed to return, and he gazed wonderingly around.

With quiet demeanor the little group watched his motions, as he slowly revived, and at length spoke. Even at that awful hour, his words sent a chill to every heart. His first glances had fallen upon Julian, who had been foremost in assisting him, and a deadly fire lighted his dying eyes.

"Fool, you dare stand there and triumph over me? Never mind, but I'll—"

His breath failed him, but he glared fiercely at him. Julian's face was full of pitying compassion.

"Poor, mistaken soul," he said to De Leon. "And yet we can not pity him, so devoid of any humanity as he is; although I must confess my heart shrinks when I contemplate the revelations he must hear before he dies."

Gradually the wounded man revived; momentarily he grew stronger, until, after the lapse of an hour, he conversed with the physician and Jacinto.

He had several times essayed to address Julian or De Leon, but Viscarra forbade it.

A movement was visible near the rear of the room, and the men stepped back. One gaze, and Zarate sprung to his feet with superhuman strength, only to sink helplessly back.

"Helene Valencie, you escaped once, but you do not now! Seize her, seize her! Where's Ricovi? Did I not see him?"

"Here I is—all tied up," came from under the table.

Helene hung tremblingly upon her mother's arm. By her side stood Julian, and a little in advance the mysterious Leota.

Zarate's heart beat with a vague terror, and his vile bosom swelled with hatred and jealousy as he beheld them, sweet Helene and her noble lover.

De Leon stood by Leota's side. Waving his hand to enjoin silence, he fixed his stern gaze upon Zarate, and addressed the group:

"My friends, it may seem inopportune to some of you—those of you who are unacquainted with what I shall shortly reveal—thus to harass the last moments of a dying man."

The wounded officer started and shivered. De Leon continued:

"To us who know, who are familiar with the course pursued by him, no punishment is unmerciful. Now, Colonel Zarate, to you I speak. Listen." He stepped nearer the dying man.

"Know me, not as colonel in the Spanish army—not as 'an equal in rank' with yourself, but, as one who has watched your most secret doings, who has known much of your private life of wickedness. Know me as one who appreciates your entire incapacity as commander of the troops, as one who understands you thoroughly."

"Look upon me, Antonio Zarate, and recognize the *secret agent* of our king, who was placed here to guard the royal interests, and spy the actions of many who little suspect my purpose. You, Colonel Zarate, have been watched, and through the agency of a few firm friends your victims have escaped your machinations. Your conduct has been reported, and the king declares you removed and cashiered, should you survive this; such is your doom. And, my friends," he added, turning to the group, who, astounded and surprise-stricken—with two exceptions—listened to his words, "I am also instructed by the same authority to grant full and free pardon to Pepe Pinto, charged with desertion; and to Julian St. John, accused of aiding in the same, but which is, I know, a base fabrication."

De Leon paused, and it would be impossible to describe the awful look in the wretched Zarate's face. Horror, consternation, incredulosity and shame were blended in his countenance as he gazed, helplessly, at the king's agent.

"It appears to me, gentlemen, that this proceeding is unkind. You must perceive you are endangering the patient's life—that a well person would sink under it."

"You are wrong, Viscarra; it is *right* that the guilty should hear their doom. Possibly when you are an hour older you will change your mind."

Viscarra bowed.

"Other revelations, the blackest of social crimes, stand against your name, Colonel Zarate, and as you seem before a sort of tribunal, you shall hear them before you pass to the terrible presence of the Judge of right and wrong."

Noiselessly a graceful figure, clad in deepest mourning, glided up to Zarate where he lay, his head reclining on Viscarra's breast.

"Do you remember 'Leota of the Ebon Mask,' whose warning you despised? I am she; and I will honestly confess, in thus coming to you, more pain is experienced than pleasure. But, for humanity's sake, for her sake, the spotless Helene, I come."

"Antonio, it is many years ago, but don't you remember the shady cottage on the banks of the softly-flowing Guadalquivir, where the sweet flowers bloomed, and balmy breezes blew? Don't you remember another flower, a human blossom, whom you swore to protect and cherish, love and guard? One who gave her young heart in all its freshness and girlish purity to you, her *husband*? Yes, Antonio, you have not forgotten her, though you thought she had ceased to think of you. Do you remember your wife—*Isabella*?"

She threw off her heavy mask-vail.

"My God, *Isabella*! What do you here?" he groaned.

Helene darted forward, and gazed earnestly in Leota's face.

"My promise is fulfilled, dear child, never to unmask till I disclosed his wickedness."

Of the assembled group but two seemed calm and unsurprised—De Leon and the Senora Valencie.

"Another word, Antonio: would you look upon the features of a beauteous maiden, spotless and pure, despite your machinations? Would you see her again who bears the name of Helene Valencie? She is here; gaze upon her, not as such, but—listen and thank God you escaped the awful crime—as *Helene Zarate—your child and mine!*"

She turned to Helene, with a cry of rapture. "Darling, darling, my daughter, my own sweet child!" and she pressed her wildly to her heart.

"Thank God, my mother, my precious mother! How sweet it is—mother, dear mother!"

The two seemed almost exhausted in their heavenly joy; the sight was one angels would smile upon, and bless.

In speechless astonishment the assembled friends looked on; Julian stood like one in a dream, gazing first upon the mother, then upon the weeping child; from them to Signora Valencie, who nodded pleasantly upon the tableau, and to the dying colonel, his blanched face and staring eyes glued upon Helene.

One gaze was sufficient to read his soul. He was overwhelmed. It was too much, all this overpowering news, and he sunk beneath it, as a child cowers under a blow. Gradually his frozen lips framed one word—"Helene!"

She turned her tearful eyes upon him, then buried them in her mother's breast.

But Julian stood like one possessed.

"I can not understand it," he ejaculated, passing his hand bewilderingly over his brow.

"But 'tis true; true as the Scriptures; and the proof, look at us!"

Leota—or Signora Zarate—turned her face and Helene's toward the lover. He gazed scrutinizingly at them.

"Yes, it is so; the same lustrous hair; the same beautiful eyes, the expression, the voice, the manner. *Mother*—my mother; I am your son. You will not reject the love of another child?"

"Never," she replied, tenderly. "Here, Julian," she said, uniting their hands and clasping them in her own, "receive my blessing—a *mother's* warmest benison. May He who has so signally favored us and restored us all to each other, ever love, and guide, protect and bless you!"

Julian bent and pressed a loving kiss on Helene's fair cheek, tears of joy coursing down their faces; the mother and foster-mother embraced her in silent joy, while the rough men, the hardy soldiers, could not repress the rising tears, and struggled vainly to conceal their emotion. All but Zarate, who, in his abject grief, was more repulsive than when defiant. He did not seem to relapse, and the surgeon proposed taking him again to his quarters, where he could be cared for.

"No, no, I won't go," he whispered. "Let me die! Ruined, disgraced, what have I to live for? A wife who hates me, a child who fears me, enemies on every hand. No, no, I *won't* live; I *must* die!"

Something of the old spirit had returned.

"And, again, Zarate," said De Leon, "let me explain why I appeared so pleased with your diabolical plans. It was *policy*; you remember I never *suggested* any thing. It was necessary I should do so, in order to prove what was long suspected. And with the aid of your injured wife, or 'Leota' and 'Nina,' I took good care that no ultimate harm should befall your victims. The challenge to the duel was accidental, but a well-fitting link in the chain of events that has led to this grand result."

"Where is Nina?" asked Helene, of her mother.

"She is here now, darling. I will call her."

Leota left the room, and in a second Nina, with her beautiful vail of flowing hair, entered.

"Did not Nina tell the forest-bird the hunter had a strong arm and a stout heart to save her?"

Helene started as she heard the voice. There was something, a memory of an indistinct past, a longing for something, a vague, unsatisfactory feeling.

"Nina will say adieu, forever, to the forest-flower. But the warm sun and the refreshing dew will ever invigorate and enliven and beautify her. Nina goes forever. Adieu!"

She quietly withdrew, as Leota returned, her vail laid aside.

"Has she gone so quickly?" asked she.

"No, signora; 'Nina' still remains, no less loved than 'Leota'—no less admired than 'Isabella.' Allow me," said Julian, archly, with a wise smile.

He unpinned her wealth of hair; it fell almost to her feet, shading her sweet face, and "Nina" smiled from under it.

The illusion was complete, and the triple mask was unmasked!

"A few words of explanation might be interesting, and if you are willing I will tell you."

"Zarate, may I tell them about it?" asked his wife, gently.

He essayed to speak, but his strength seemed

unequal to the task. His face had lost every trace of its former fiendishness, and he looked like a weary child.

"Husband, will you listen to me—to Isabella, your wife?"

How strangely tender, how unspeakably reproachful in its sweetness, sounded that long unused title.

His eye lighted suddenly, and he whispered to Viscarra.

"Lady, he requests a last favor—one he feels utterly unworthy of. He would beg you to take my place."

The request created the intensest surprise, and they gazed at him in undisguised astonishment. *He*, the lawless villain, so humble? Impossible! They knew not the change the immediate vicinity of death can arouse.

Unhesitatingly she arose, and motioning Viscarra away, tenderly took her husband's head and rested it on her bosom, smoothing the damp, disordered hair. He grasped her hand tightly, and lovingly caressed it.

"Isabella, *mia cara*, I am dying, dying; going down to my doom with a heavy load on my soul. Oh, *my wife*, I don't blame you for all the misery I have experienced this day, for I have caused *you* a thousand-fold more. De Leon, we were friends once, over in beautiful Spain, were we not? Then, for the sake of that past, forgive me—*me*, who twenty-four hours ago would have scorned asking forgiveness of any one. And oh—"

His voice grew faint, and a cold sweat stood on his brow.

Even those who had been most severe wept at the sight, and De Leon, the stern soldier, turned to hide a tear. Truly it was a strange sight, this strong man just in the prime of life, so lately the incarnation of all that was vile, now subdued and *dying*, with his head reclining on the bosom of her he had so cruelly injured. The lion had been transformed into the lamb; and Antonio Zarate was what years of punishment never could have made him—"Repentant."

"And all in so brief a time?" queries a doubting reader.

I would answer to such, even so. Have you never seen the mighty giant oak, the lord of the forest, rear its lofty head in almost conscious superiority over its less aspiring neighbors? Have you noticed, when in all the glory of brilliant bloom, of massive strength, the crashing lightning-flash split the proud forest-king, in a single instant laying it low, even lower than its humble neighbors?

That is like Antonio Zarate; the one blow so sudden, so fearful in its concentrated strength and bitterness, had been more than even his proud nature could bear; he had sunk under it, conquered and dying.

"But your promised explanation, senora?"

She gently caressed the head lying on her forgiving bosom—and what *can not* a wife forgive?—which soon would be forever at rest under the cold earth that waited to receive him, and in a low, soft voice related her story:

"It was twenty years ago that I met my ideal of manly excellence in my humble home at Xeres de Fontana, in beautiful Spain, just where the proud Guadalquivir poured its broad waves into the sea. It was there where I learned to love him, there where he whispered to my willing ear the oft-told tales of love so sweet to me. In six months we were married, at the little chapel in Xeres de Fontana, by our priest, and as his wife I was blissfully happy; Isabella St. Alban never dreamed of such joy as Isabella Zarate experienced. But only a short fortnight did I live thus. One morning my husband went away, as usual, *but he never returned*. How well I remember the agony of the time when I was compelled to believe he had left me, left me alone! Never can I forget the utter desolation of my heart when I could no longer blind myself to the fact that I was a *deserted wife*! Heaven alone witnessed my burning agony.

"Months rolled on, and then I knew I would be a mother—of his child and mine—of him who had left his girl-wife, who never would look upon his baby's face.

"I prayed then that we might die, I and my child—that a kind Father would take me out of this cruel world; but it was a wicked prayer.

"And then Helene, my black-eyed darling, came to console my worse than widowed heart with her baby sweetness.

"Antonio, you didn't know it, did you?" she asked him.

"She grew in beauty and health, and it was

when she acquired the age of two years, that I determined to take her and search for *him*. So, accompanied by my widowed sister, Elise Valencie, whom I persuaded to appear as the babe's mother, I started after my husband.

"For some time I was unsuccessful; from place to place I journeyed, but the regiment had always left, and at length, discouraged, I was about abandoning my design, when I learned he had gone to America; and to America I came, leaving my child and her 'mamma,' as she called my sister, in Spain.

"For a long time I remained in Pensacola, acting my role of 'Nina,' thereby frequently seeing my husband. Then I sent for Elise and my daughter—a beautiful girl of sixteen, who had acquired a superior education in her native land. As 'crazy Nina,' she became interested in me; and oh! the anguish of my soul when I watched her budding loveliness and yearned to have her call me 'mother!' But I only could guard her, and I did; then, when she first met Julian St. John, how I watched *him* to see if he were worthy my peerless Helene. That he was, you may know by the present engagement existing between them.

"At last I formed in my mind the plan of adopting another disguise, and, as 'Leota of the Ebon Mask,' I appeared on various occasions, still preserving my character as 'Nina,' the more to mystify the villagers.

"You all know how I succeeded; my story is done."

As she finished, Zarate spoke, in a husky voice:

"My injured wife, I feel you have forgiven me, else I could not lie here. I am dying, and soon shall be gone. But there is one request I would make. Helene, oh, *Helene*, my child, my daughter, *can you, can you* forgive me—your dying, repentant father?"

He reached forth his hand, and his eyes beamed tenderly upon her.

She clung to Julian in her agitation, and looked inquiringly at her mother.

"My daughter, come hither. You and Julian," said she, gently.

They obeyed, and stood before the dying man, who gazed long and earnestly at her sweet face, so like her mother's.

"Tell me, daughter, I am going rapidly—quick, tell me, am I forgiven?"

He held his hand to her; only a second she hesitated, as the awful recollection came surging over her; but that was over; it was a thing of the moment, and this seemed an act of eternity and death, so near did they all feel to the river.

Then she took his hand in hers.

"As I hope to be forgiven, so do I forgive all, *my father*," and stooping, she imprinted a loving kiss on his lips.

An expression of ineffable delight swept over his face, and making a violent effort he grasped Julian's hand, joined it to Helene's and pressed them feebly to his lips.

He turned to Isabella.

"I'm going; good-by—so unworthy—forgiveness—*daughter*—"

The soul took its flight, as the last breath lingered lovingly on that sweet name. It had gone, and with his head on his wife's bosom, his hand clasping Helene's, he passed away.

The commandante was dead!

And now our story is almost done; yet loth to leave our readers at a death-bed, we beg them to linger a moment while we hastily sketch a scene in the large room on the bay shore, where Isabella Zarate resided. Three months elapsed, and then the garb of mourning was replaced by the garments of rejoicing.

A fair bride was beauteous Helene, in her snowy robes, and fragrant orange-buds; and Julian not a whit less handsome in his proud manliness. The priest has blessed the blushing bride, and together, under fairest auspices, they commence their life's journey.

Heaven speed them!

De Leon is there, and the peerless Isabella; Pepe Pinto and the fair "auntie," Elise Valencie; and rumor says strange things about another nuptial party, when Julian shall congratulate his dignified "Uncle Pepe!"

Ricovi was justly punished, while Jose Escobedo received his meritorious acquittal.

Thus each in the cause of right and virtue meriting the deserved reward, as all who valorously fight for the victory in the same battle most nobly receive, in their maintenance, we leave them.

THE END.

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